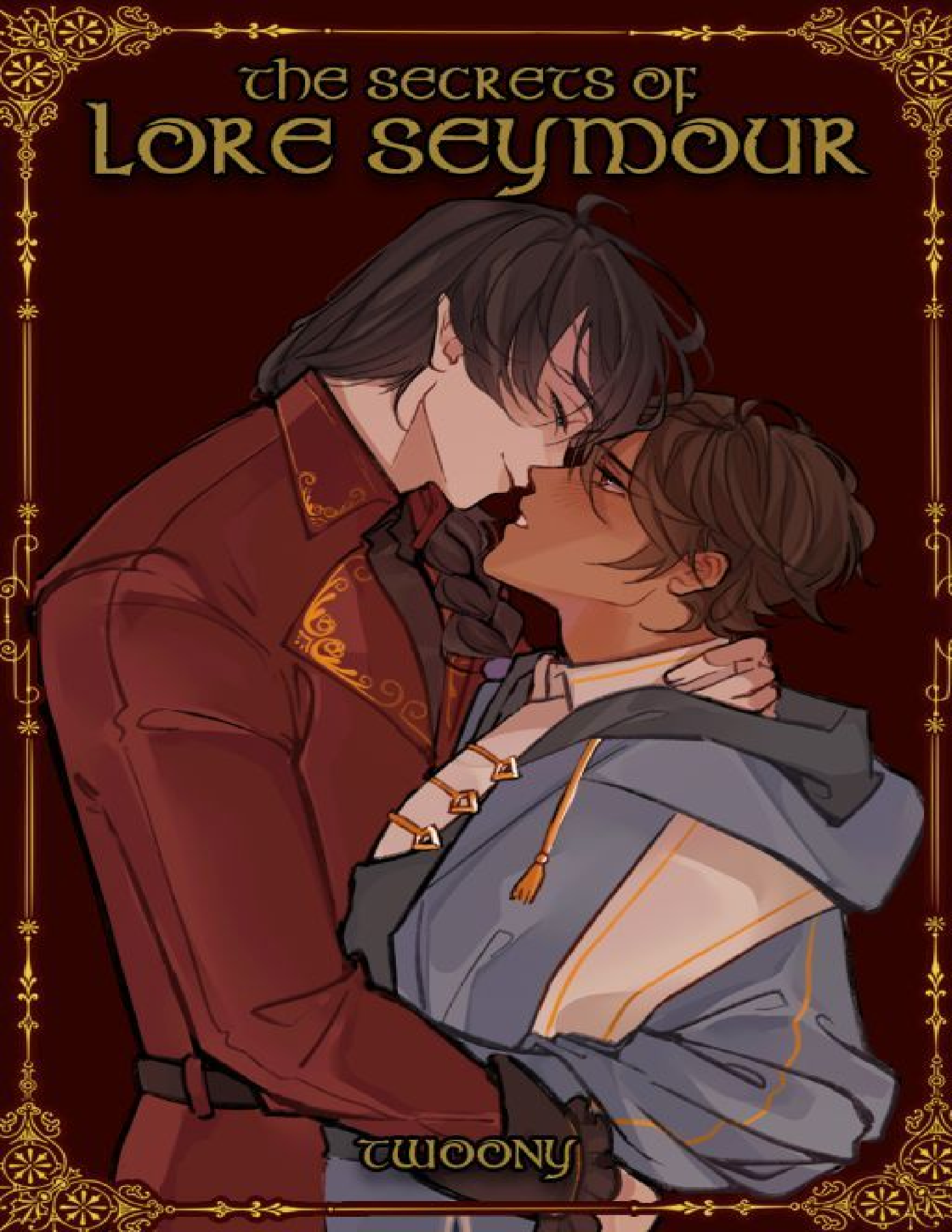
The Secrets of Lore Seymour



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INDEX & PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

***THIS IS NOT A PAID STORY! There is behind the scenes content that is purchasable, but not necessary to read. It was an experiment with Wattpad and I wanted to try. That's why there is a Paid Story mark, but the story itself is FREE :D**

Hello, hello friends!

Welcome to The Secrets of Lore Seymour. This is an Index page containing settings, terminology, and a pronunciation guide. I've often seen people requesting index pages for fantasy novels, so I made one.

Please don't let this page overwhelm you because you don't have to remember all this nor do you need to read this right now. Everything is introduced throughout the story. However, if you find yourself forgetting something or you've taken a break from the story and need some refreshers, you can jump back to this page and remind yourself!

Index

Setting

Earth (mortal realm):

Shrali - the mortal kingdom in which this story takes place.

Rhamie - the capital of Shrali.

The Holy Church - refers to the church of the Three Mothers. While it is not the only religion, it is the most practiced mortal religion worldwide.

Trinia - the main cathedral of the Holy Church, which is located in Rhamie.

States - are areas within the kingdom ruled by Lords, Ladies, or Lieges, often relatives to the royal family.

Silra - a state within the kingdom ruled by Lord Lore Seymour, one of our MC's.

Nosa - capital of Silra, the city near Lore's estate.

Vampire Realm:

Vexsis - the planet where vampires are from.

Istolon - the main vampire kingdom where the king presides.

Zulia - the capital of Istolon.

The Holy Church Terminology:

The Three Mothers - sometimes referred to as the Mothers or the Holy Mothers, it's the main religion of the mortal realm where followers/faithful believe there are three supreme beings who are the "mothers" of the world. Kaluya Goddess of Earth, Jasta Goddess of Sun and Maeita Goddess of Moon.

Elminore - the God of Chaos believed to be the creator of Vexsis, true ruler of the vampires, and an enemy of the Three Mothers.

Divinity - the Holy Church refers to magic and mana as divinity; a holy power gifted to them by the Three Mothers.

Casting - as the name may suggest, it refers to casting spells, but the Holy Church doesn't like to use the term "spells," so they just refer to it as a cast or casting.

Seraphic - a user of divinity. Typically every magic user is called a seraphic unless being spoken of by nonbelievers or they've committed a crime, in which case they're called a mage.

The Prophet - this is essentially the sovereign of the Holy Church, kind of like the pope. There is only ever one and they are picked based on what they have achieved for the Holy Church. The Prophet signs off on holy missions and sees to running the church.

Ebony Hawinan - the first Prophet of the Holy Church who battled against the vampires during the Vampire Wars and came to a truce with their king, Morren Valyork.

Champions - these are the elite warriors of the Holy Church, those who have proved themselves in battle against vampires and nonbelievers. Champions often control their own legions so they're sort of like war generals. They are only beneath the Prophet in terms of power and prestige.

Paladins - these are warriors just beneath Champions, those who have seen battle and proved themselves but may not have as much divinity or experience needed to be a Champion. Paladins often run squadrons for jobs that require less people or go out on lone missions.

Holy Knights - these are the general warriors of the Holy Church who may or may not possess divinity. They're tasked with basic jobs such as watching after civilians and standing guard. They're like police officers for the Holy Church and do not work for the nobility.

Priests - priests do not fight. Their job is to heal people spiritually and physically. They give sermons at the churches as well as attend to the sick and injured. Sometimes they join holy missions, but their primary job is to heal injured paladins, holy knights, civilians etc.

Clinicians - the researchers of the Holy Church. They try to understand divinity better while also attempting to strengthen the members through research. They only ever see the battlefield in order to retrieve corpses to test on and often spend their days in the grand library of the capital.

Surveyors - exactly as their name describes, surveyors travel the continent in search of seraphics, illegal vampires, or troubling activities that the church should handle. They record every act of divinity and determine whether the wielder should join the Holy Church or not. If not, the seraphic

is registered under the church should they ever decide to call upon them for help. All illegal activities are also reported to the church to determine if they should get involved and who they should send.

Faithful/Followers of the Mothers - these are the people who worship and practice the teachings of the Holy Church.

Vampire Terminology:

Celestials - they're referred to in ancient vampire texts, speaking of a vast cosmos made up of enormous power and energy. There were three of them orbiting one another and traveling across the skies of Vexsis, emitting huge radiation levels, but Vexsis was far enough away not to be affected by it.

Nectar - refers to human blood because it tastes much sweeter than vampire or animal blood and strengthens them. However, it's also addictive. Vampires can go mad from drinking human blood if not taken carefully.

Warlords - giant mechanical suits that vampires often use in battle against mages.

Trait - vampires and dhampir cannot use magic, but each vampire/dhampir has a unique ability that only they can do (examples: fire control, telekinesis, etc.)

Morren Valyork - the vampire king, who has ruled for almost 2000 years so he was king during the Vampire Wars and remains as such now.

Basic Terminology:

Vampire - vampires come from another world known as Vexsis. They are sensitive to sunlight on earth since it is a different light than from their world, however, it doesn't kill them. Sunlight does irritate their eyes and skin. UV Ray lights that are up close and held to their skin for long periods of time can cause burns. Vampires born on earth aren't as sensitive since they're accustomed to the light. They have above average strength, speed, and agility, as well as prolonged life. Natural appearances of vampires consist of flawless skin due to their healing abilities, fangs, pointed ears,

long nails, and abnormal heights (around 7'0"). Their eye colors reveal their strength. Light red is rather weak, almost as weak as a mortal. Red is the most common and it's average among vampires. Orange eyes are often part of the aristocracy or come from a powerful lineage. Golden eyes are the strongest and live the longest.

Dhampir - those who are half mortal and half vampire. Condemned by both sides more often than not. Dhampir are often slightly below the height of vampires and their eyes can consist of any mortal color and any vampire color. Unlike vampires, they can and will scar if the wounds are deep or even repeated. Their ears aren't as pointed either, but they have the same fangs and neurotoxin. Like vampires, they also can't use magic, but they do have a trait.

The Gateway - a tear in the sky stretching for miles that links Vexsis and Earth. It can be crossed by airships and rests not far from the mortal capital of Rhamie.

Magic, mage, mana - self explanatory, but all these terms are used by vampires and any of those who do not follow the Holy Church. Magic is also not something people can learn. You're either born with mana or without it. However, those born with mana can train to have more and become stronger. Magic has four colors to denote the strength of the user, a lot like vampires and their eye colors. The weakest color is white, used by most who aren't trained. Silver is second, most often used by members of the Holy Church. The third is gold, used most often by well-trained seraphics and very high members of the church. The strongest is a mixture of all three, which only a few have mastered and one must have in order to become the Prophet.

The Vampire Wars - refers to the war between mortals and vampires almost 1000 years ago that lasted 53 years. Since then, there has been a tense truce between the realms.

Blight - refers to the toxin created by both vampire and dhampir that is injected through their fangs when they bite. It paralyzes animals in Vexsis, does not affect vampires or dhampir, but for humans it's a euphoric and outlawed drug.

Red Moon - a terrorist group operating on Vexsis and Earth that frequently attacks both vampire and mortal nobility, as well as the church. Also refers to the moon in Vexsis, which is actually red.

Pronunciation Guide:

Lore Seymour: Lore Say-more

Seren: Sare-in

Draven Morrow: Dray-vin Mar-oh

Cyan Tracein: Sai-an Trace-in

Arline Micklyre: Are-line Mick-liar

Shrali: Sh-rah-lee

Rhamie: Rah-me

Trinia: Trin-ee-ah

Silra: Sil-rah

Nosa: No-sah

Vexsis: Vex-sis

Istolon: Eh-stole-en

Zulia: Zuh-lee-ah

Kaluya: Kal-ooh-yah

Jasta: Jah-stah

Maeita: May-ee-tuh

Elminore: El-meh-nor

Ebony Hawinan: Ebony Ha-wee-nan

Morren Valyork: More-in Val-york

Again, please don't let this overwhelm you. This is meant to be a page people can jump back to if they've taken a break from the story or simply forgot something in the novel. If there's something you see in the future that you think should be added, let me know.

1. Lord Seymour

Seymour Manor rests at the end of a long path far from the hustle and bustle of city life. The chimneys and peaks of the home appear over the tops of the trees first. Then through the forest, I get the first glimpse of the estate. A venerable home of old money based on the gothic architecture and brick styling that lacks the metal sheets and piping found so frequently within the cities. Beautiful in it's simplicity, surrounded by a thick forest and lush green grass rather than gray smog, clinking gears, and over stacked buildings.

Laughter of children garners my attention. To the left, four kids frolick among the trees. Two dangle from a branch, kicking at each other to see who falls first. The remaining two giggle and squeal as they run from a woman through the yard. A woman that I soon realize to be a monster.

She, too, takes notice of me. Coming to a halt, she stares at me with pink eyes that shimmer brightly against her brown skin. She calls to the children, though her voice doesn't quite reach me. Ushering the children to her, she guides them towards the estate while continuously glancing over her shoulder like I'm the beast in this scenario.

I was told of the children--I believe there's four more--and how Lord Seymour had another dhampir working at the estate. However, I'm still baffled that he allows her to keep watch over the children alone. The wolf should not be welcome to play among the sheep.

Sighing, I clutch my luggage tighter and continue to the manor. A stone ramp built to the side of the steps leads to the tall front door. After a few knocks, the wooden door opens to reveal yet another monstrosity; a vampire.

My initial instinct is to reach for the axe strapped to my back, to defend myself or relieve him of his head, but that is not why I'm here. Although the

option isn't entirely off the table, depending on what circumstances may arise in the future.

"Good afternoon, Sir. Are you the Paladin of the Holy Church? Seten, was it?" The vampire with hair red as blood dons a polite smile that even a fool would see to be fake. No doubt he isn't putting in the effort to try otherwise.

"Seren, actually, and yes, I am. You must be Draven." I offer up my hand that he's as unwilling to shake as I am to offer.

"Yes, I am Draven Morrow, the head butler of this fine estate." His orange eyes look unnatural against his pale skin, but I know they're a sign that he is not one to be taken lightly. He shows little fear towards me either, holding himself high with the unnatural height pure blooded vampires possess. Once their appearance alone made my knees shake. Now, I know I can take them head on and never lose anything to them again.

"You've had a long journey from the capital. Please, come inside," Draven says. He steps aside to allow me entrance, although I suspect he'd much rather run me through with the talons on the tip of his fingers.

An immaculate foyer greets me, as expected. Marbled floors shimmer against the afternoon sun cascading through the windows. A double staircase leads to the second floor, one side contains a chair lift. Above the room, a diamond chandelier rests smack dab in the center, casting shapes of snowflakes across pale yellow walls.

"Do you not have other luggage?" Draven inquires from the open doorway while observing the empty path behind us.

"Those of faith have little need for material possessions. The Three Mothers will always provide," I reply.

"I suppose so." Draven gestures to the right. "Your room is this way."

"I'd rather meet with Lord Seymour first. Is he home?" There were two cars out front, but one never knows how many vehicles a Lord wishes to waste

his money on. I've heard from the Prophet that the king has nearly two dozen vehicles. Almost one for every day of the month.

"Yes. His Grace is in his office." Draven heads to the left and I follow. He moves without making a single sound, as if the floorboards strengthen themselves in his presence to prevent even the tiniest noise.

I watch him carefully, prepared for him to turn around and reach for my throat. That's normally what vampires try to do on the battlefield. I'm not really accustomed to following some into a home where they supposedly won't cause any harm.

The walk is short to Lord Seymour's office. Draven knocks, then bows his head. "My Lord, the Paladin of the Holy Church has arrived. He wishes to speak with you."

"Send him in," Lord Seymour replies in a soft tone of voice that I did not expect.

"I will take your luggage to your room." Draven offers while nodding towards my suitcase. I leave it with him before entering Lord Seymour's office to be surprised once more by his appearance. From what I heard about him, I imagined a beastly man as rotten on the outside as he is on the inside. However, he is actually... quite unexpected.

"Seren, Paladin of the Holy Church, I welcome you to my home," Lord Seymour says from behind his desk. Unlike Draven, his smile offers a far more welcoming aura that radiates just as strongly from his piercing and lustrous blue eyes. They're eerily bright in contrast to his black hair and alabaster skin.

"I thank you, as does the Holy Church. We both appreciate your agreeing to these investigations and offering up your hospitality, Lord Seymour," I say with a nod of feigned respect.

"There is nothing to thank me for. How could I possibly say no to helping the Holy Church?" Lord Seymour laughs.

His fangs that are too sharp to be mortal, but not sharp enough to belong to a vampire, peek over his bottom lip. He also doesn't carry the same looming height of a pure blood vampire, but does remain a tad taller than most. And though his response came across as humorous, there was an annoyed cadence to his voice warning me not to be fooled by his charming demeanor.

"After all, it is my duty as Lordship over these lands to ensure the safety of my people. If the church believes the Red Moon group has begun housing their operations in my state, I cannot sit back and watch. It is an honor to have the Holy Church send one such as you to assist in the protection of my people," he adds while rising from his desk.

The money of the Seymour family and it's boundless proprietaries keeps Lord Seymour dressed immaculately. He likely wears the finest suits available, ones that hug his wide shoulders, thin waist, and long legs in an alluring fashion. It would be hard for anyone to take their eyes off him, regardless of the fact that he's a dhampir; the unnatural offspring of a mortal and a vampire.

"Would you care for a drink?" he asks, already standing in front of a glass cabinet. He retrieves a bottle of red liquid, grinning when I stare incredulously at it. "Don't worry, this is red wine. Blood is much thicker."

Lord Seymour sits on one of the couches in the center of the room. He adjusts his loose braid to rest over his shoulder while I take a seat on the couch across from him. My axe rests against the arm of the couch, close enough to reach should I need it.

He pours a glass for the both of us, then takes a long drink and licks his lips. "Although, as a Paladin to the church, you should be able to easily distinguish blood from wine, shouldn't you?"

Ah. I see that he's going for the passive aggressive route. Yet another surprise as I had steeled myself for a more hostile working environment; blunt, rude, and dismissive remarks rather than a more gentle prodding. I'm not sure which I would prefer, so I guess we'll see as the days go by.

"Yes, I have seen my fair share of bloodshed while seeking justice for all those harmed by the beasts of Vexsis and their Dark Lord Elminore," I say before taking a drink too.

Lord Seymour peers over the rim of his glass, showing no reaction to the mention of the vampire's homeland and master.

"As you are already aware, my mission is to locate any possible leads to the Red Moon terrorist group, but the Holy Church, as well as myself, would like to do more," I say, preferring to get straight to business. The faster I get out of here the better.

"More?" he hums.

"Any city the Red Moon moves to becomes overrun by illegal vampires and thus infested with crime. No doubt the same will happen here. I hope you'll allow me to accompany you on your ventures. I've been informed that you keep a close watch and involve yourself frequently in the crimes that take place in your state. Surely you wouldn't mind another pair of well trained eyes at the scene? There could always be a connection to the Red Moon that may lead us to finally capturing their leaders."

"So you wish to play investigator with me?" He snickers.

"Putting it simply, yes."

"I would never deny the help. It's always needed. Do as you please."

"Thank you, Your Grace. I will do my best to remove the Red Moon group and spare your people from the havoc they bring."

"I'm sure you will, however--" Lord Seymour tips his glass towards me and smirks. "Since we'll be partners for some time, I would prefer it if you called me by name."

I hesitate at the notion. "Are you certain that's appropriate? You are of the nobility."

"By adoption, as I'm sure you were already made aware."

When I don't immediately call him by name, he puzzles me a third time in a day by puckering his lips into a childish pout. I don't quite know how to process the expression. Vampires and dhampir snarl, spit, and curse at me. Pouting is a definite first.

"Come now, must we be tied to old and frivolous traditions? Call me Lore. I insist."

I really rather not. First name basis with a dhampir lord has never been on my wish list, but I was asked by the church to get this job done. If playing friendly is what I have to do, then so be it.

I nod skeptically. "As you wish... Lore."

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" He stands up and adjusts his jacket, leaving the empty glass on the table. "Come along, I will give you a short tour before dinner."

I follow Lore out of his office and through the halls. He speaks of troubling topics in town that may or may not have to do with the Red Moon as well as describing the areas we pass. I listen closely to every word, take in every hall, and make note of every closed door. A map formulates in my head, as does the beginning of a profile on the man chattering away in front of me. The way he carries himself with poised confidence, how his words carry double meanings, every single moment with him memorized because I am not here to search for a terrorist group.

I'm here to determine if Lore Seymour is the most prolific serial killer our world has ever known.

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Story completed.

Hello, do not refer to my characters as sex positions; top, bottom, seme, uke, etc. They have names. Use them.

You may also notice some chapters are a bit short. There will be longer chapters sometimes, but this is what's working for me right now. Please respect that. I've been having a lot of fun writing this story so I hope everyone enjoys. What do you think of Seren and Lore so far? The tension we can already see between a paladin and a dhampir? Will our boys be able to get along? ;) Make sure to let me hear your thoughts before hopping on over to the other chapters!

And here's some absolutely wonderful fan art of Lore's estate and Seren's arrival made by zeruwi !! :)

2. Orders of the Holy Church

A Few Days Ago

Receiving a summons from a Champion of the Holy Church meant one of two things; trouble or opportunity. In my case, it was an opportunity.

"Lord Lore Seymour of Silra, have you heard of him?" Champion Olere asked. Rays of sun beat against the stained glass window situated perfectly behind him, illuminating his strong silhouette that I have always been incredibly envious of.

I sat in front of his desk stiffer than a week old vampire corpse. Nerves had eaten away at me since yesterday when I received a request to meet with Olere the following morning. Although we have always spoken fairly regularly ever since I was a child, and even saw battle together, I've never quite gotten over the anxiety from being around him. One cannot easily calm themselves in the face of their savior and idol. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Olere was the only reason I was alive. I owed him everything and more.

"No, Champion, I have not. Is he a new noble who converted to the Holy Church?" I asked hopefully.

Too many nobles have hid themselves from the light for too long. Most continued to do so purely out of spite, frustrated that the public had seen the errors of the monarchy and turned their hopes rightfully to the church.

Olere scoffed immediately. "Certainly not. Lore is a dhampir."

Disgust rose in my gut. My skin crawled. Then came the confusion. "I've never heard of a dhampir having a lordship."

"Lore Seymour was adopted by Monroe Seymour about two centuries ago. He, along with his wife and two children, all died by the time Lore was twenty-five. Everything they owned was left to him, regardless of the futile

attempts of their extended family to choose otherwise. He has held his position as Lord of Silra ever since."

There have been stories of mortal lords adopting dhampir children as a sort of charity case. Something among the nobility that made them feel more powerful than they actually were. A way to show their kindness towards the most unfortunate of the world when, behind closed doors, they were anything but and everyone knew it. However, none ever left everything they owned to a dhampir. Most peculiar. Olere didn't give me the time to ask about it either.

"I'll cut right to the chase, Seren." He leaned forward to speak sternly, "The Holy Church fears they've stumbled across proof of the most prolific serial killer our world has ever known and Lore is on the list of possible suspects. His family may have been the first of many kills, but there was never any proof nor do we have proof now that he's involved in the mysterious deaths we've uncovered. He is, however, one of the few capable and with enough hatred towards both the nobility and the church to attempt such atrocities."

That was quite a lot of information to take in. Olere gave me the time to process it all and still my mind only came up with one question; "What kind of atrocities?"

Olere scratched his beard. His furrowed brow deepened when he retrieved one folder after the next from the bottom drawer of his desk. My eyes widened after he set at least a dozen folders filled to the brim with papers in front of me.

"At first, local law enforcement thought nothing of these deaths. They were robberies gone horribly wrong or everyday crimes, albeit gruesome, because nothing truly connected them. But we accidentally stumbled across two patterns after an unfortunate young seraphic got himself into trouble and was forced to go through old records." Olere snickered, though the joyous sound was short lived.

He sat his hand atop a folder and added, "The first pattern is that these murders are all against the elite and powerful; those of high status in the aristocracy and the church. The second pattern is the crime scenes, which

are eerily immaculate. There's never any trace of another being in the room even when the scenes are horrendous."

Olere opened a folder to offer me a thin stack of papers on one of the cases. He was right, there was little information concerning the murder. The local police couldn't find evidence, only the body of a man strung over his bed with his skin flayed. The crime scene showed that he was alive when the killer started the gruesome torture.

"This is sick," I said, swiftly returning the folder to the pile. I've been in countless battles, but never seen anything quite like that. I hoped to never see it again, although based on what Olere spoke of, I may be walking directly into the path of similar murders.

"Yes, it is. Unfortunately, we do not know if these two things are actually patterns or not, especially because the murders are spread throughout the kingdom and over an extended period of time. Even still, it has left a sour taste in the mouths of many at the church. There are too many of these unsolved murders, so the Prophet held a meeting with the Champions. We've decided to send Paladins to investigate a few of the suspects, see if our fears are true or we're just being very paranoid."

Olere grabbed a letter near the edge of the desk. He held it up and declared, "This here is a letter addressed to Lord Seymour requesting that he allow a paladin to stay at his estate as the Holy Church investigates movements of the Red Moon. We'll send the letter out this evening, then you will leave in two days to live at Seymour Manor while you pretend to search for a terrorist group."

"If Lord Seymour is this serial killer, he must be very clever. Do you think he will agree or believe this farce?" I asked, although I would follow the orders of the church regardless. Everything they do has a purpose and that purpose serves the greater good. It is an honor to be among them. Here, I've found belonging and purpose. And for that I am grateful and in their debt.

Olere chuckled. He rounded his desk to stand beside me, placing a heavy hand on my shoulder. "You know as well as I that the power of nobility is barely anything more than their names. No aristocrat can say no to the Holy

Church. He'll let you in because he has to and, if he is the killer, he doesn't want to seem like he's hiding something. Be careful though, Seren. There's more than him to worry about at the estate."

"Does he harbor more dhampir as his workers?"

"A dhampir, a vampire, and one of our own."

"A seraphic working for a dhampir," I whispered, incapable of fathoming the idea. Olere knew that without my having to say so. He patted my shoulder.

"A few years back, after you had gone out into the field, Lore visited the Prophet, although I was not privy to why. There was a young boy that he managed to coerce into leaving the church. We do not know what he was promised, but he has served Lore ever since. Such a pity too." Olere leaned against the desk, crossing his arms and shaking his head. "I recall the child. His aptitude for divinity was on par with your own. He would have made an impressive paladin, perhaps even a champion one day."

I sat taller at the notion. Even if Olere didn't mean to imply that one day I could be a champion, his words meant the world to me. And maybe, if I did well on this mission, I would make him proud and join him at the champion's table. My dream finally coming to fruition...

"In other words, I'll be surrounded by very powerful enemies who all hate me," I said. A frightful thought, but also a bit exciting. I couldn't deny that I enjoyed a challenge, it was what drove me to the position I am in today. And should things go wrong, I would rid the world of a few more monsters.

Olere smirked. "Yes, but I'm sure they'll underestimate you. Evil always does."

Olere grabbed a few folders to hand to me. I held them hesitantly, not hiding my disgusted scowl. He laughed and said, "I know you may not wish to see the others, but I think it's best if you use the next few days to read over a few cases. You may see something we didn't and we can't have you taking these to Seymour Manor. If Lore discovers them, he'll know your

true intentions. I doubt he'd kick you out or do you harm, but his defenses will rise. We may not get the answers we seek."

"I will do as the Holy Church commands, Sir. It's an honor to be trusted with such an important task."

"And it's an honor for us to have one as kind, courageous, and loyal as you in our family." Olere ruffled my hair like he had when I was a child. My chest warmed. "Keep us informed of your progress. The other paladins will be reporting to us as well. Should they find anything, we will extract you as soon as possible."

"Yes, Sir."

I rose up easily enough, which apparently made Olere think that meant I needed a few more folders because he stacked another five on the pile. Grinning, he smacked my shoulder and sent me on my way to read horror stories that gave me nightmares, which said a lot about the content.

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So the Holy Church believes they've stumbled across a serial killer and Lore is a suspect. Is the church being paranoid or is there actually something to be discovered? What do you think about Seren and his relationship to Olere, as well as the church? Will Seren achieve his dream and become a champion?

Here's fan art of Olere made by the wonderful [zeruwi](#)that window and lighting though <3333

3. The Seymour Family

Present

Seymour Manor takes the shape of a square with a cutout in the center. Lore explained that the worker's quarters are on the left side of the mansion, although only three live fulltime on the estate. The worker's quarters are used mostly during winter storms so employees don't have to face the cold, or as storage closets. The front of the mansion has a second floor where the bedrooms preside. The right leads to a schoolhouse that has a handful of classrooms, playrooms, and a small medical center.

"Where are the children? I saw them playing outside earlier when I arrived," I ask.

A wave of worry washes over me after realizing I haven't heard their laughter nor seen them since my arrival. Could the dhampir have harmed them? Would she have when Lore is so near? A part of me knows I'm overreacting while another reminds me that overreaction is better than none at all when it comes to vampires.

I'm a moment away from gripping my axe to search for the children and protect them when Lore replies, "Considering the time, they are likely in the music room."

Lore leads us out of the school house to the courtyard at the center of the estate. I've known most nobles to show off a courtyard of exquisite flowers, fountains, or ridiculously overpriced toys like breathing mechanical dragons, but Lore's belongs to the children. There is a fountain that's likely made from one of the finest craftsmen of the kingdom, but you can't tell thanks to the rubber duckies and childish drawings across the stone. Admittedly, I prefer this fountain over the others I've seen. There's so much more personality and an entire story told in a single glance.

Toys litter the yard along with playsets, swings, a sandbox, and an impressive garden filled with vegetables and two very full apple trees. I jump in surprise when a violent squeak originates beneath my foot. It seems I have stepped on an unfortunate squeaking dog that now stares up at me in betrayal. Lore laughs and continues on, expertly dodging the toys while I carefully tiptoe around them. Who would have thought children's toys would be more difficult to avoid than a vampire's attack?

At the back of the manor, connected to the main house by an open walkway, is the music hall. The sounds of a piano grace my ears. Glass makes up half the walls of the music hall, allowing us to view the woman I saw earlier instructing a boy on how to play. Lore opens the doors quietly, gesturing for me to follow him inside. He watches the boy play proudly. I can't decide if it's an act or not.

Observing the hall, I notice the other three children from earlier coloring quietly in the corner. There are a few doors along the opposite wall likely leading to private training areas. The boy finishes the musical piece with a flourish. The woman claps excitedly while the boy sways side to side.

"Well done, Nalo," the woman exclaims. "I told you, give yourself another week and you'd be a master. Now... it's time to move onto the next song."

"Arline!" Nalo whines but laughter slips from his lips. "I barely managed to play this one. You think I'm better than I actually am."

"Nonsense," Lore speaks up, causing Nalo and the three younger children to spin his way.

"Papa!" They cry and race to Lore, who gets on his knees to embrace them. Their faces light up like they've been offered their favorite candy. Even Lore shows a sweet smile that may be the most genuine of any expression I've seen from him today, or he's a frightfully good actor.

Lore pats their heads one by one, then grabs Nalo by the chin to say, "Don't put yourself down. You've performed wonderfully and I'm excited to hear whatever you play next, Nalo."

"I'll do my best to play you something really pretty, Papa." Nalo giggles when Lore kisses his temple.

Lore holds the smallest child in his arm, who eagerly plays with Lore's braid, which quickly turns it into a knotted mess. Lore doesn't pay it any mind as he stands and gestures at the dhampir.

"Arline, will you fetch the children for me? I'd like to introduce them to our guest," he says.

Arline doesn't hide her disgruntled expression nor her sharp glare pointed at me. Still, she nods and heads to the other rooms to retrieve the remaining four children. I realize why there are so many ramps around the estate as well as the chair lifts when a dhampir in an automatic wheelchair exits one of the rooms. Behind her, a boy with a metal prosthetic leg follows.

Once all eight children surround us, I take in their appearances. The children consist of mortals, vampires, and dhampir alike. Olere spoke of Lore adopting many children over his long life, but I didn't expect so many to be here or consist of the three races. Seeing as Lore is a dhampir, I expected to find only other dhampir. This should make him look good, but my suspicions rise even more. Is he truly hiding something behind the doting father facade? There isn't a much better cover than that. We let our guard down around children. He may be expecting that and using it as a shield.

"Children, this is our guest from the Holy Church, Seren. He's a paladin who will be living with us for a while and helping me with some work. I hope that all of you will treat him kindly." Lore reaches over to poke the cheek of the tallest girl as if he is speaking to her specifically. She rolls her eyes, clearly pretending to be annoyed by the attention and swats his hand away.

"Seren, this is Arline Micklyre, our House Mother--" she's a very intense House Mother. "And these are my children." Lore proceeds to rest his hand on the head of the children he introduces individually. "Oliver, Ashby, Angel, Nalo, Hyun Woo, Reegan, Isabella, and Darika."

"Nice to meet you," I say, trying to look each of them each in the eye. The eldest, Darika, ends up being the only one who meets my gaze and she doesn't look that eager to see me. Not that I blame her.

"I'm not sure what instruments you play, but I learned to play the saxophone when I was a bit older than you," I say to Nalo, who I'm presuming is around seven or eight. "If it's alright with you, I'd love to join your practices."

Nalo stands a little taller and perhaps considers my offer until Darika bites, "You're not going to try and convert us, are you?"

"Darika," Lore says softly.

"What? The Faithful love preaching acceptance until they meet one who doesn't follow The Three Mother's doctrine without question. If he starts dragging us to sermons, I'll..." Darika smirks. A villainous spark rises to her eyes. "Do absolutely nothing at all."

Which means she's going to do a lot of very, very bad things. I've only learned how to deal with adults who act up. What in the Mother's names am I meant to do with a child? Give them a good lecturing? Take away their... toys? Do teenagers still play with toys? I was training at her age so I haven't a clue what kids are into, especially not now. I feel much more under prepared than expected.

"She's harmless," Lore says, then gives Darika a look like he's chiding her with his eyes. She shrugs.

"I would never do anything like that without Lore's permission," I say, then feel a sudden, overwhelming pressure from the mixture of shell shocked and utter hatred ruminating among the children, Arline, and Draven, who abruptly reveals himself by standing next to Darika.

I don't know what I've done to deserve their piercing glares and snarls until Hyun Woo points at me and declares, "That's Lord Lore to you, Mister!"

I jump in surprise, looking from one person to the next. When my eyes land on Lore, who hides his wicked grin behind Oliver's blonde curls, I realize that I've been played. He has already set the entire household against me simply by making me speak his name. Damn it all. I should have expected a trick.

"My Lord," Draven says, ensuring to put emphasis on the word Lord. "Dinner is ready."

"Excellent!" Lore grasps Hyun Woo's hand while continuing to hold Oliver. "Let's go eat. I'm absolutely famished."

One by one, the kids follow Lore and each of them glare at me. One of the twins, Angel I believe, even sticks her tongue out. Arline snarls, revealing her fangs, and Draven scoffs like I just spat on his most expensive pair of shoes.

I see that this has already gotten off to a bad start. Feeling just a little dejected, I follow Draven out of the music hall.

That could have gone better, although it also could have been much worse. I'm not really meant for this kind of field work. My jobs have always been more of the stab-stab type rather than whatever this is.

My mood is suddenly lifted when I notice one last building hidden behind the grandeur of the estate; an old cathedral. Finally, a piece of home! Even if it is a tad rustic with rusting iron clasps on the door and missing shingles.

"Draven, is the cathedral used?" I ask while taking a few steps forward to admire the high steeple and shimmering stained glass at the center of the tower. The archways remind me of home, of Trinia Cathedral's pearlescent gates and shimmering granite walls inlaid with gold. Grasping my necklace of three spheres--the sun, the moon, and the earth--I raise it to my forehead and begin a prayer.

"Yes, it is," Draven replies, puzzling me even if I asked.

"There are those who attend chu--"

I'm cut off by a sudden explosion from within the church that shatters the windows. The ground shakes. I reach for my axe. With a few verses, divinity flows within me, converging as golden light in my core to cover my skin in slightly translucent golden armor. Smoke rises from the shattered windows. Then the front door bursts open and a man runs out screaming, "Nobody panic! I've got this under control!"

His jacket being on fire says otherwise. The man throws the jacket to the ground and stomps vigorously on it, repeating, "Nobody panic! Nobody panic!"

"As you can see," Draven says and outstretches his hand towards the stranger like nothing out of the ordinary transpired. "The church is used by our resident idiot."

"Hey, I heard that! I'd like to see you calculate the necessary mana to transport living matter from one continent to the next without spontaneous combustion!" The so-called resident idiot bellows while stomping towards us until his emerald gaze lands on me.

He stands frozen under the open walkway, gaping like he has seen a ghost or possibly intrigued by the idea of eating a few flies. I almost do the same because this man is mortal, which means he's Cyan; the one Lore convinced to leave the church!

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We've met Lore's family; he has eight adopted children. Is Lore truly a loving father or is he using it to hide something dark? Will Seren be able to win over the kids when Lore already managed to mess with him? And what's going to happen between Cyan and Seren? Would love to hear your thoughts about the story so far!

The messy backyard of Lore's estate also drawn by the wonderful zeruwi lol it's so cute <3

4. Surrounded by Distrust

"What is that *thing* doing here?" Cyan asks while jutting his thumb towards me.

"Thing?" I repeat, aghast.

"You should know, Cyan, seeing as you were meant to meet him at the airship station this afternoon and escort him to the estate. Luckily for Seren, he's at least capable of finding his way," Draven replies in a manner that I believe to be insulting because *at least capable* is a very odd yet specific way of phrasing a statement.

Cyan holds up a finger to argue, then he gapes, stares, rapidly blinks, and huffs in slow realization. I've also slowly realized that he does not quite suit his name. Emerald green eyes. Silver hair. All black clothes covering almost every piece of pale skin regardless of the summer heat. Where's the cyan? Who named him and were they color blind? Or am I color blind?

"Damn," Cyan says with a roll of his shoulders. "That's my fault, but I wouldn't have gone even if I weren't busy--"

"You mean if you didn't forget?"

Draven's question is ignored as Cyan continues, "I have no interest in helping a religious zealot. Why the hell is he here anyway?"

"That was also explained when I told you to retrieve him from the station." Draven's smile speaks volumes; he's a second away from retiring the resident idiot. Permanently.

"Well, I, uh..." Cyan blushes, then digs a finger in his ear and stares at the ground where he knocks the tip of his toe against the grass. "Your... your voice annoys me! So, like, whenever you speak I don't process the information."

"Clearly."

Cyan flinches like someone pricked him with a needle.

Draven turns to walk away. "Clean up your mess quickly, otherwise you'll miss out on dinner."

"It's time for dinner?!" Cyan bolts towards the smoking cathedral. "I'll be right there! Don't let that brainwashed trout anyone near my food. He'll contaminate it!"

Religious zealot. Brainwashed trout. I'm eager to hear what name he creates for me next. I knew I wouldn't be welcome, but this has taken a turn I never expected. Even the children despise me for something I didn't know to be insulting. Lore is a careful trickster. I'll have to do my best to match him.

Draven guides me to the dining hall where Lore, Arline, and the children line a long table overflowing with food and blood. Consuming human blood without permission is illegal so vampires rely on animals. Dhampir consume food *and* blood, needing a bit of both to be healthy. Regardless, the sight of pitchers containing thick crimson being passed around like it's mere water makes my stomach knot. Two maids scurry around the table, ensuring that everyone has everything. Lore rises from his chair to assist Reegan in slicing through a bloody steak.

"Take a seat wherever you'd like," Lore says without looking my way before retaking his seat at the head of the table. "Feel free to let the cook know if there is anything special you'd like. He'll be sure to make it from time to time during your stay."

"I appreciate any food given to us by the Three Mothers," I reply and take a seat next to Darika, seeing as the only other option is Arline. Between the two, I choose the moody teen that glares over the glaring House Mother.

Conversation flows across the table. Nothing out of the ordinary, just typical child-like innocence where they discuss games, toys, and the occasional hair tugging. Lore listens intently to his children and spends more time on his feet than eating. He wipes food from the twins' chins when

they make a mess or rushes over to prevent Nalo from dumping a goblet of blood all over him. A doting father or good at pretending to be one?

Arline never takes her glare off me so my food tastes extra spicy. Draven never joins us, but I guess butler's usually don't? And when Cyan arrives, he grabs a plate while ignoring my attempt to call for him, then hurries out of the room to do who knows what. I just hope it doesn't involve an explosion in the main house. My heart continues to ache for the destruction of such a lovely cathedral that, based on Draven's reaction, has likely been blown up a few times prior to this incident. What a waste and insult to the Mothers.

At the end of dinner, Arline takes the children back outside to play. Lore gestures for me to follow him to the second floor.

"Your room is this way," he says, escorting me through the halls to one of the last doors on the right.

"You didn't have to walk me. I could have found my way." And I would have been able to snoop, although that may be the very reason he didn't take his eyes off me. I highly doubt he believes I'm here to investigate the Red Moon group. He doesn't trust the church, and therefore doesn't trust me. So long as he doesn't know my true intentions though, I should be able to find answers in time.

To be perfectly honest, I'm not entirely certain why Olere or the others chose me for this mission. I've always done more battle focused fieldwork, fighting against vampires that have caused harm to mortals and protecting our people against their cruelty, but I will not question their orders. They sent me for a reason. The only reason I can conclude is that they suspect this place to be dangerous and needed someone who could handle themselves if the situation turned sour. I won't fail them.

"I'm certain you could have found your way, but I'm worried." Lore rests a hand over his heart. "A man of faith isn't accustomed to such luxuries. I will stay by your side in case the shock is too much for you."

"I never expected you to have a sense of humor, even if it's lackluster."

"Everyone has a sense of humor, albeit some more than others." He opens the door to my accomodations that is, as he said; luxurious.

My room at the church contained only what I needed; a bed, a closet, a lamp, a wrack for my axe, and a shelf for the Three Mother's doctrine. The room I've been given has that and much, much more. A deep green canopy encapsulates the bed that could house four. A fireplace sits across the room with two chairs and a coffee table practically begging to be used. There's also a door leading to another room that I'm almost worried about inspecting.

"This is far more than I need or could ask for. Thank you, Lord Seymour." I smile at him, already expecting him to play innocent by pursing his lips.

"Don't tell me you're returning to calling me Lord Seymour. I told you to call me Lore."

"And do others at the estate call you by name?"

"The older children sometimes do," he replies, shrugging.

In other words, I should not call him by name, otherwise I'll get a similar response to earlier.

"I think I'll continue referring to you as Lord or Your Grace, if you don't mind."

Lore sighs as he leans against the doorway. "What a pity. I had hoped being on a first name basis would help lessen the tension of our working relationship, but if that's what you want, so be it."

Lore retreats to the hallway. With his hand on the doorknob, he says, "I advise you to get your rest. Tomorrow, I will give you a tour of our lovely city and we'll begin looking into this concerning case of the Red Moon."

"Alright. Goodnight, Your Grace."

He nods and shuts the door. Once his footsteps disappear, I get to unpacking my bag while going over what I have seen today. As heart warming as

Seymour Manor appears to be, that does not mean nothing dark lurks beneath the surface. Even the most monstrous of beings can show acts of genuine kindness and love. I've seen it before. I've seen what can go wrong. I've felt how wrong it can go and had to clean up the aftermath.

Lore has surrounded himself by those who adore him, as if they're a mask disguising the truth. We see what he wants to see; loving children and a man with a heart of gold. Deep down, I do truly hope that's true. He's merely a suspect, not necessarily the culprit. If he is earnestly helping these children, then I want him to continue to do so as long as he can, as long as his true nature hasn't taken hold. The world is in dire need of those willing to do all they can to help others.

However, one cannot be too careful. We cannot trust what we initially see, especially when it comes to vampires. Dhampir often don't fall too far from the tree either. They're creatures of darkness and deceit. They thrive off chaos and lies, prone to violence and eager to shed blood; our blood specifically. Nectar, as vampires call it, supplies an intoxicating taste that also enhances their strength. Although, it can be addictive when not taken carefully, which they always fail to do eventually. Even after centuries since the Gateway tore through our sky and vampires came to Earth, we've yet to be able to live harmoniously. They steal lives like thieves steal coins and feel no remorse. On top of all that, they're intelligent enough to hide their true intentions, to make others believe them to be righteous and caring until the time comes that they rip out your throat.

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Welp, Seren didn't really get to talk to Cyan. What do you think about our cast so far? How do you think Seren came about his very intense beliefs? Would love to hear your thoughts :)

A line-up of our wonderful cast, from left to right, Arline, Draven, Cyan, Lore, and Seren by zeruwi :)

5. Dad Mode

Cyan P.O.V.

"Why is that rotting sack of belligerent assetry here?"

"We've told you why at least three times," Draven growls. He grasps my wrist to prevent my further pacing. With a single tug, I fall onto the couch beside him. The pads of his fingers manage to break through many layers of clothes to touch my skin. His touch is searing hot. I shiver and rip my hand away.

He frowns while mumbling, "Sorry."

Turning away from Draven and his frustratingly handsome mug that I kinda want to punch all the time, I look at Lore for answers. He sits at his desk, elbows resting on the surface while his chin's perched atop his hands. He watches me with a sharp gaze. One that frightened me at first when I saw him at Trinia Cathedral, walking through the temple of an enemy without an ounce of fear. He stared down the Prophet as if she were nothing more than an unpleasant bug in his path. He terrified me, while also giving me a strange form of hope.

"I know the bullshit lie the church gave us for why he's here. I'm asking why you're letting him stay," I say, trying to keep my voice calm but stern. Unfortunately, that's not a skill I've been graced with.

If the church really wanted to, they could tell Seren to kill us, send more paladins or champions if he fails and rid the world of this whole family. No one would do anything about it. There'd be no investigation by the police, the monarchy, no one because the church can devise any excuse they want and make themselves appear to be the heroes.

"We all know what he is, what he's capable of," I add. "None of us are safe--"

"And neither is he," Lore interjects, silencing me immediately.

I'd never speak over him. I owe him my life and, frankly, he's the closest thing I've ever had to a father. The sperm donor wasn't exactly top tier Dad material, or even bottom tier Dad material. He was, however, top tier shit material.

"Seren knows not to trust us and that we will not trust him. He won't step out of line when he's in enemy territory unless we make him," Lore adds.

"Or the church makes him," Arline grumbles under her breath. Lore takes notice. We all do. Rising from his desk, he sits beside her to place a gentle hand atop hers, squeezing slightly before resting his hand in his lap.

"We aren't to cause harm to Seren. The last thing any of us want is the Holy Church having an excuse to send their militia here, even if the thought of butchering those fools does bring me immense joy," he whispers the last bit like a spell of his own, eyes blazing bright.

"Aren't they trying to find an excuse to do that already?" I ask, gesturing at the door as if that piece of grimy bird shite is out there. "He isn't here to look for a terrorist group. He wants to find something on you because Nosa, hell, all of Silra proves that we can live together harmoniously. You give people hope and the church crushes that every chance they get."

"Harmoniously is a bit of an exaggeration. Crime and discrimination continues to be rampant. It merely pales a bit in comparison to elsewhere," Draven speaks up, earning a narrowed glare from me.

How come he only speaks to annoy me? I'd say it's because of The Unspeakable Incident, but he has done it ever since I arrived at Seymour Manor eight years ago. Always picking a fight. Always nitpicking. He's such a nag. It's a shock he isn't the House Mother running after the children, although that may be exactly why Lore chose Arline. She actually lets them breathe!

I'm about to pick a physical fight with this jackass when Lore says, "That very well may be why Seren's here, but we can't be certain. Your jobs are to

protect the children, our home, and keep your eyes on him. He'll be keeping his eyes on us, of course, and snooping about the estate."

"There are ways to prevent that," Arline suggests while glancing at me. The wild glint in her eye makes my legs shake. I'm always up for some heinous fun! "We have our mad scientist here. I'm sure he could conjure up a few spells that even that paladin won't be able to fight against. Keep him locked up in his room like a princess in a tower."

"I would love to do that!" I exclaim and Draven shushes me. He gets a third glare of the evening that has him rolling his eyes.

"Try to contain yourself," he lectures. "Otherwise that very paladin will be down here wanting to talk to you, most of all."

"Why me?" I whine, then hold up my hand when Draven honestly looks ready to answer. "That is a rhetorical question. I get why. I'm not as stupid as you think."

"I don't think you're stupid. I know you're an idiot."

"What's the difference?"

"Boys," Lore says a single word that has us both sitting up straight and facing him. His soft smile is telling enough; we're getting on his nerves. Arline snickers, which earns her a slight pinch from Lore that reminds her he will go Dad Mode on all of us if we push him, regardless of our ages. Hell, I'm fairly certain Draven's almost a 100 and he still goes rigid as the dead at the thought of Dad Mode.

"Returning to the topic at hand," Lore says. "Do not underestimate the paladin. As much as we all hate the church, there's no denying that their training--"

I flinch at that poor word choice, which may have been why Lore said it. He rather say training in front of me than what it really was; torture. I recall the days spent under the scorching sun, getting beaten by our instructors for not being fast enough, strong enough, or determined enough. They preached we

were striving for the greater good. We were warriors of the Mothers sent to rid the world of evil, all the while they beat children half to death, and I believed every word they said for a long time. I may have believed them forever had things gone differently.

"--does produce some more than troubling soldiers. If Seren has risen to the rank of paladin, it is for a reason. We must take this threat seriously, especially the two of you." Lore looks between Arline and Draven. "He was specifically trained to hunt and kill us. Don't make him use that training."

Sighing, Arline nods, but still speaks fiercely, "So long as he knows to stay in line himself, but if he even looks at the children funny, I won't hesitate."

"I know and I don't expect you to."

"So what is our plan concerning Seren, exactly?" Draven asks. "Are we going to let him snoop or are we meant to get in his way?"

"Since it is I he's more interested in, I'll keep him as preoccupied and irritated as I can." Lore's wicked grin promises Seren a world of trouble and I love it. "He'll tag along on my journeys into town, but concerning the manor, let him snoop around to his heart's content. There's nothing to find here. Once he realizes that, he'll be on his way because the church will have no further excuse to be here."

"That still means he could be here for months," I groan.

"Don't fret too much, Cyan. He'll be as miserable here during those months as we are."

I sure hope so, even if a very small, practically nonexistent and, like, very deep part of me does pity him. The Holy Church knows what they're doing. They've perfected their technique to lure people in. Like me, Seren was probably brought to the church after losing his family and made to believe the church was his family. That's what they do so you become loyal and fearful of losing the last bit of love you have left. As much as I hate them, it's genius, and I almost fell for it too...

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We got a POV switch to Cyan. Our Seymour group is ready to face things head on! What do you think of the so-called resident idiot? What could this *Unspeakable Incident* be between Draven and Cyan? And what do you think about how Cyan views the church vs Seren?

6. Always Perfect

Cyan P.O.V.

"Hurting Seren physically is off the table, but what do you suppose about mentally?" Arline asks. She sits on the kitchen counter sipping blood from a glass. Draven stands across from her, cleaning up the mess we made while rummaging the kitchen for snacks after our talk with Lore.

"You heard His Grace. We aren't to cause harm, and that includes whatever mental fuckery the two of you are trying to conjure up," Draven replies around a knowing stare that could rival Lore's if either of us didn't respect Lore a hundred times more. Not to say we don't have respect for Draven. Of course we do, but he's not Lore. They aren't even remotely comparable, which sounds more insulting than it's meant to be.

"It could be carefully crafted mental fuckery. Bit by bit, we pick away at him until he goes running home with his tail between his legs," Arline explains, looking at me for agreement, which she should already know she has. Great minds think alike, after all!

"I must side with Arline--"

"You always side with her," Draven begrudgingly interrupts. I kick him in the shin. He whacks me in the side of the neck with a damp cloth, which hurts far more than I'd like to give him credit for.

"I'm simply saying, none of us like the bastard. I'm definitely not going to pretend that I'm happy he's here. The sooner he leaves, the better, so let's fuck with him a bit and make him want to leave," I say and hop onto the kitchen counter next to Arline. The cooks hate when we do that. They aren't here to stop it though.

I already finished the cookies I grabbed from the cupboard. If the kitchen staff asks where they went, I'm blaming the kids. Without hesitation or remorse. They blamed me for eating the last of Oliver's birthday cake last

time when I know it was one of them! Oli cried for, like, three hours! And Lore made me clean out all the chimney's, without magic, as punishment. Those sneaky little asshats.

"He will leave sooner if there's no trouble. Speak harshly all you want, so long as you don't give him reason to stay," Draven orders while looking between the two of us like he expects us to get into trouble now... and okay, I was considering freezing some water outside that pompous peckerhead paladin's doorway so he'll slip in the morning, but that's just a little prank!

Arline snaps her fingers. "So we have permission to be verbally mean and minorly violent? Maybe throw a rock at him once or twice? Nowhere vital of course, just, say, his ankles."

Draven heaves a long breath prior to pinching the bridge of his nose. "I can't deal with either of you."

"You should be used to us by now." Arline hops off the counter to set her cup by the sink. Some blood drips onto the counter. Draven glares dagger as if to say *"bitch, I just finished cleaning."*

"I'm going to bed. I'll need my rest if we have to put up with this bullshit for a few months." She waves goodnight, then steps out of the kitchen without having cleaned up the mess. Probably to purposefully piss Draven off.

Well, there's no way I'm staying here alone with him, especially when he's in a bad mood. I'm about to follow Arline's lead when the very person I'm trying to escape from grabs the back of my shirt. At least it wasn't my hand this time, although my body likes to react as if they're one in the same. I shiver and hate myself for it.

"Cyan," he says. That alone shouldn't make my toes curl, but here we are. "Don't go out of your way to bother Seren."

"I don't need or want your lecturing," I growl while pivoting on my heel to face him so he'll release me. Maybe not my best idea because now I see how close he is. I almost ran smack dab into his chest. Draven peers down

at me with those freakishly bright orange eyes of his, the ones that were always breathtaking, but they get worse by the day. It's a curse, I swear.

"This isn't a lecture," he claims, leaning too close. My eyes dart to his lips, the ones I used to wonder what they felt like and now wish I didn't know.

"Everytime you speak to me it's a lecture or an insult." And a reminder of our positions. Draven is Lore's right hand man. Lore goes to him first for help. Draven's the one who leaves in the middle of the night, takes long trips to who knows where, and knows every piece of business Lore's associated with or will be.

I want to be that; someone they can rely on. Even if it's only Draven at first, if he asked for my assistance on something... I'd be ecstatic. I know I'm the last choice because I'm childish and erratic and simply not as good as Draven and Arline, but I try. I really try to be. I want to be relied on. I want to help.

"Not every time," Draven argues, his voice unusually soft. "I'm speaking seriously, keep a distance from Seren. For your own good."

"You and Arline have more to worry about than me."

"Do we?" His gaze darkens and lips set into a thin line.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Draven gives me a brief once over.

Why does it feel like he sees right through me, always? Even when I've never told him or Arline about my past, Draven simply seems to know. I trust Lore to never tell him, so maybe I'm the problem. The truth's written all over my face, or something along those lines.

"Nothing," he finally grumbles, turning to clean up after Arline. "Get some sleep."

"I'll get some sleep if I want to... which happens to be now, but it's of my own accord, not because you told me to," I declare, practically feeling

Draven roll his eyes. Not that I blame him. I want to bang my head against the wall for whatever that was.

Before Draven decides to make me question my restraint any more, I swiftly leave the kitchen. Every time we're alone, I'm the one left feeling both nauseous and excited, which is not a combination I'd recommend. What does he get out of our interactions? A sense of superiority, probably. He's always composed. Never looking less than perfect--well, there was one time he got flustered for the briefest moment ever.

My entire body heats up at the memory that I shove back into it's ironclad box and kick it into the depths of my mind where it belongs. The Unspeakable Incident must remain unspeakable even in my mind, but pretending it didn't happen doesn't lessen the rapid racing of my heart that won't stop even after I'm far out of Draven's view. It's not fair.

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Well, well, Cyan seems to have some pretty big feelings towards Draven. What do you think about this *Unspeakable Incident* and Cyan's envy concerning Draven's position as Lore's right hand man? Will Arline and Cyan cause trouble for Seren or let him do his business and leave? Very interested to hear what you think of these characters now that we've seen more of them from another perspective!

7. Child Innocence

Seren P.O.V.

I recognize the nightmare I'm in for it's one I've had a thousand times. The only change is me; once a boy and now a man standing alone among the fields. Back then, the crops covered my head. Now they reach my waist. I can see it all happen.

Across the field sits a small house. My house. I no longer remember if the color is right. Was it always red or was it brown? Was Papa always that short? Was his hair peppered gray? Did my brother, Saul, smile like that or was it more crooked? It's been so long since I've seen their faces that they become warped, but their deaths never do. They're always bloody and terrifying and...

I practically throw myself out of bed before the nightmare truly begins, heaving giant breaths that do little to ease my racing heart. The nightmare fades as I take in my surroundings, though where I am could also be considered a nightmare.

Groaning, I push myself out of bed. Seems, even here, I wake before sunrise. That's not surprising, I've been doing that for over a decade. Training required waking up at dawn and working until well after nightfall. The routine has never quite left me.

The mansion sleeps based on the eerily quiet halls. A few lights illuminate one side of the mansion, which I presume is where the children sleep. I steer clear of their rooms and take to the stairs down to the first floor. There's no sighting or sound of another being awake.

As tempting as it is to snoop, I really should wait. The last thing I need is for one of the kids or workers to find me sticking my nose into something I shouldn't, further proving that they should dislike me. For now, I go about my usual morning routine.

The sun is about to rise when I perform my stretches in front of the manor. The first thing I notice are the cars; one is parked slightly to the right compared to yesterday. Did someone leave last night? Then, I run the perimeter, ensuring to take in whatever the estate has to offer. The only object of interest is the slightly broken down cathedral with boarded windows now.

Considering what Cyan said yesterday, he must use the cathedral to study divinity. Other than that, there's nothing out of the ordinary from first glance, which is to be expected. Still, I had hoped to find a lever hidden among the trees or a trap door by the music room. Not only would it be useful, but also incredibly hilarious. Just once, I'd like to find the cheesy villain lair.

After my run, I step inside to find Lore descending the stairs, long hair draped over his shoulders. He wears a navy robe that shows too much of his chest; the curves to his well toned stomach and the teasing glance of a V line. His pale thigh peeks far too sensually through the slit of his robe when descending the stairs.

I swallow hard and look away just as he adjusts his robe. Possibly to hide a faint scar across his abdomen. That must be new if it has yet to fully heal; what could it be from? The sight also reminds me of my own; the ones visible on my arms that lay bare for all to see. I should have worn my robes on the run. It's not as if I haven't done it before, but it's warmer here than in the capital. I had to take extra breaks to catch my breath.

"Good morning," Lore says at the bottom of the stairs, finally concealing himself by tightening the robe around his waist. His hand rests elegantly against the banister as he stands tall like a perfectly molded stature in a grand art institute. "I hope you didn't wake for an early run because you had an uncomfortable rest. If that's the case, we can find you another room."

"No, I slept wonderfully." Which isn't exactly true. The bed is so soft that I was almost frightened that I'd fall right through it. I'm more accustomed to sleeping on grassy ground while on the roads.

"Many seraphics such as myself are creatures of habit. We wake before dawn and a good run leaves me feeling invigorated. I didn't happen to wake you, did I?" I ask.

"You did, actually." He struts by me in the direction of the dinning hall while flicking his fingers, instructing me to follow. "My hearing, you see. I'm not accustomed to anyone taking a run in the morning, but it won't be a problem now that I know it's you."

"Sorry, the thought hadn't even crossed my mind." I throw a look over my shoulder towards the stairs. "I didn't wake the children, did I?"

Lore snorts. "You don't need to worry about that. Even Cyan's experiments gone wrong can't wake those rocks."

I chuckle and earn an elegantly raised brow from Lore followed by, "So he *can* laugh."

"Like you said, everyone has a sense of humor."

Lore hums before opening a door leading to the kitchen. Two cooks must have just arrived because they're putting aprons on. Both offer a smile and inform us that breakfast will be done soon.

"We're only here to get a drink," Lore explains. He opens a cupboard filled with glasses and grabs one for himself. I get a glass too and chug some water to quench my parched throat. Lore fills a pitcher to take with us back to the dining room.

"If I may make a suggestion," he says after taking a seat. He points towards the many scars on my arm. "If speaking of those troubles you, you better change back into your robes. We do our best to teach the children not to ask uncomfortable questions, but... kids are kids. They're curious."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll go do that."

But Lore's warning came too late. When I reach the top of the stairs, I come face to face with Ashby and Angel. They rub their tired eyes in unison, then

Ashby gapes at me while Angel asks, "Where'd you get those scars, Mister?"

Ashby elbows her and hisses, "Papa said we shouldn't ask inv... inventory questions."

I bite the insides of my cheek to keep back a laugh. I'm guessing he meant *invasive* questions.

"Ah, well, I already asked." Angel shrugs, then somehow worsens the situation by adding, "Since you're one of those paly-things, you probably got them fighting dhampir like us, huh?"

My blood runs cold and hands clench into fists. How am I meant to explain to them that the innocence they have today will not follow them to tomorrow? A day will come when the bloodlust takes over. They'll harm and brutally murder even those they were close to and paladins like me will be the ones to cut them down. I can't say that. I shouldn't and I won't.

Ashby throws his hands over his mouth in horror. His terrified voice becomes muffled when he squeaks, "M-Mister kills dh-dhampir! You're scary!"

"I... you don't..." The words lodge in my throat. They taste rotten.

Angel points accusingly at me and declares, "If you try to hurt us, Papa will kick your ass."

"We a-aren't supposed to curse either," Ashby mumbles, but his sister ignores him.

"I'll fight you too," she says and actually punches me in the knee, which does hurt. Dhampir share their unnatural strength with vampires. Even a child's punch could potentially knock a grown man out if they're determined or trained well enough.

"I'm not here to hurt any of you," I say, trying to ignore the memories of the dhampir and vampires I have slain. The ones who I've chased or chased me

through fields, woods, and city streets. Fangs, claws, and traits that could topple buildings or slaughter an entire city block.

Kneeling in front of them, I take a chance to rest a hand on each of their shoulders. Ashby freezes like his soul has vacated his body while Angel stares me down and keeps her fists up. I offer them a smile that I hope puts them at ease and say, "I'm here to help your Papa look for bad people in town--"

"Those bad people being those like us, most likely," Darika chimes in. She appears from the closest bedroom to the stairs. She approaches swiftly to ease the children away from me and proves that, even while being protective, siblings are still assholes by adding, "So you two better be careful. If you do something bad, the paladin here may ship you off to the church where they'll squish your eyes into jelly beans and eat your toes like nuggets. Ahhhh!" Darika screams causing Ashby to cry out in terror and burst into a fearful run.

"Papa!" echoes vehemently behind him, followed by Angel's hurried steps to either escape me or make sure her brother doesn't pass out on the way to the dining hall. I gape at Darika, who winks at me like she didn't just mentally scar two of the children.

"Darika, stop scaring your brother!" Lore's voice calls from the dining room. Darika snickers and walks away, leaving me shocked and speechless at the top of the stairs.

I... do not completely comprehend what just happened. I was asked about my scars that were very swiftly set aside when Darika decided to make the children go from hating to being terrified of me. This job was not meant to entail earning the children's trust but, at this rate, they may be more dangerous than anyone else!

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Ah, poor Seren. He's not the greatest at handling kids lol What do you think about Seren's nightmare? Do you believe what Seren does; that a

day will come when all dhampir and vampire fall to their bloodlust? Will Seren ever be able to win the kids over? Who knows!

8. Speaking Honestly

Ashby sits in Lore's lap during breakfast. Angel whispers to Reegan and Hyun Woo, likely about the incident this morning. And I sit next to Darika, who's smug smirk informs me that she took great pleasure in making a monster out of me. That jerk move feels like something my brother would have done, if he were still here with me...

Suddenly, Draven enters the room dragging a half conscious Cyan by the collar of his shirt. Odd. Cyan constantly wears long sleeves, practically covering every inch of skin even on hot days. Isn't he hot?

Cyan's so tired he actually sits across from me to eat. I'm invisible, which gives me an opportunity, but then Draven whispers something to Lore.

Lore kisses Ashby's temple and likely tells him something reassuring before announcing our departure. The mention of my name causes Cyan to sit up so abruptly that his neck cracks loud enough for all to hear. He doesn't seem to care as he stares wide-eyed at me, then glares, practically challenging me to try talking to him. I would, if Lore wasn't already behind me.

"Wait with Draven in the car, I will join the two of you momentarily," he says, then heads upstairs to change into something other than that accursed robe that looks just as goo--ridiculous from the back as it does the front.

Cyan's spared of my questioning today, but I want to hear from him eventually. More so out of my personal curiosity than the church seeing as they didn't give orders to bring him home. Why did he leave? Why stay here, of all places? What did Lore offer that was so tempting? Is he actually safe here?

After retrieving my axe from upstairs, I head to the front door. Arline waits there. She doesn't speak until I stand in front of her, "If anything happens to His Grace because of you, know that there's nothing the church can do to save you."

I snort. "I'm not surprised that the first words I hear from you are a threat."

"If you were surprised, it'd prove that the church sent the wrong man for this job. Whatever it really is," she growls the last bit, then walks back to the dining room where the children's laughter echoes.

As expected, none believe I'm here for the reason the church stated even if it is a believable cover. They're as paranoid as I am, possibly even more so. I'll have to work hard to solve any case Lore allows me to be a part of, regardless of whether it pertains to my true mission. Perhaps it'll ease their suspicions enough to give me more breathing room. The longer the mission takes the more chances there are for Lore to kill again, if he truly is the serial killer, and if there actually is one.

I hate all this running in circles, not having answers. Out in the field, everything was easier. If a vampire or dhampir killed a human, I killed them. If vampires started a rebellion, I battled against their attacks and searched for their leader. Simple as that.

Draven already has the car running when I step outside. I'm not used to someone opening the door for me so I almost run into him when he goes to do so. Although his expression remains apathetic, there's a glint to his eyes that says he doesn't want to open the door for me either, but does so anyway. What a faithful butler. I hope he's at least paid well.

I slide into the back while adjusting my axe so it sits on the floor between my legs. Lore joins us a few moments later in another extravagant burgundy suit that holds him in all the right ways. He joins me in the backseat that's far too small. When his thigh brushes against mine, I press myself against the door. That does little to separate us or lessen the sudden heat. Do all cars heat up this much when they're driven? I've never spent much time in them, seeing as chasing vampires in a vehicle is never a good idea. They know far more about mechanics than mortals ever will. The machinery that exists today is thanks to them, even though it pales in comparison to what they have in Vexsis, so I've been told.

"Does something trouble you?" Lore asks while leaning closer. "Worried I might bite?" he snickers and retreats to rest comfortably against the leather

seats. "A trained paladin such as yourself shouldn't have to worry about that. You were tortured--"

I glare at the bastard who snickers before correcting himself, "I meant you were trained to withstand the toxin in our bites."

"All seraphics are trained against the atrocities of your kind."

"My kind?" he echoes, brushing his hair over his shoulder. "What vampire have you met that welcomes a dhampir with open arms?"

"I admit I haven't met many who wanted to have a chat with me."

"Or many that you were even willing to have a chat with. It must irk you that there are monsters around you now that you must tolerate seeing as you've only ever cut them down." He watches me for a reaction that I don't try to hide.

"It does bother me, so I'd like to get this job done as quickly as possible."

"Likewise." Lore hums. He retrieves a small notepad from the inner pocket of his jacket to hand to me. "You have quite the timing. There has been a horrific murder last night--"

I recall this morning; seeing this very car parked slightly out of place. The possibility of what that means lingers in the back of my mind.

"The body was found by the victim's brother this morning. We're heading there now. I thought you would want to accompany me since the police have discovered narcotics hidden among his belongings. He may be involved with the Red Moon," Lore finishes.

"How sad though," he adds while crossing his legs. "I had hoped to give you a tour of our great city so you could send a good word about me back to the Holy Church. I want nothing more than to impress the great and generous leaders of our kingdom."

The emphasis on kingdom was done purposefully. There has been a lot of talk among civilians, nobles, and faithful alike concerning the dwindling

power of the aristocracy. Everyday we lean closer to the new and rightful rulers; the Prophet herself. Obviously, as a member of the aristocracy and a dhampir, Lore isn't fond of that inevitable future. I'm not sure what he, or even the aristocracy, expect. Their screw up during the Vampire Wars are proof enough that they aren't worthy to rule. Although it happened almost a thousand years ago, the consequences still affect us today. The Holy Church saved us and do far more work for everyone than nobles have ever done.

Lore smiles kindly enough to fool most. The softness to his voice even makes me hesitate before growling, "I'm already growing tired of your offhand remarks. Don't think I'm too dull to realize the implications. If you have something to say about me or the church, then speak it honestly."

I hate that I shiver when his eyes drift over me in one, slow fluid motion. Then his smile disappears, replaced with an almost disappointed scowl, "And here I was hoping that you'd play along with me a while longer, but alright."

He leans in so that his quiet whisper is heard over the roar of the engine, "How old were you when the church abducted you from your family? Eight or nine? A bit older, if you were lucky."

Though I told him to be honest, the question annoys me all the same. How dare he accuse the church of abducting children. What further blasphemy has he accused of them or will accuse them of in the future? If I hadn't been ordered to remain by his side, I'd have punched those fangs straight out of his mouth, at the very least.

"I was *saved* from bloodthirsty beasts, not quite different from this butler of yours or you." I spit, keeping my eyes locked on his quiet blue gaze. "Saved by a now champion of the church when I was seven. I witnessed the demise of my family. Had they survived the vampire attack, they would have been honored to know their son's divinity granted him the chance to become a seraphic and now a paladin."

Lore doesn't hesitate to coldly reply, "No, had your family survived, you would have never seen them until the church deemed you brainwashed enough to no longer view them as your true family." Then he scoffs at my

glare. "See? You react immediately at the mere implication of an insult upon the church, but speaking of your brutally murdered family doesn't even make you flinch. The church really did a number on you."

I grasp my robes tight enough to rip. What does he know of my family? What does he know of what I went through? Of what I'm still going through? The nightmares. The fear of looking into the past. This... repugnant asshole!

Lore grins, waiting for my response that never comes because the only response I wish to give is one of violence.

The sounds of blaring sirens suddenly appear. Draven parks the car a moment later alongside the road. Police vehicles line the street ahead of us outside of a thin, towering metal building where the smoke stacks spit out clouds that remind me of home.

"We're here," Draven states as if we don't have eyes to see it. He steps out of the vehicle, obviously heading over to open Lore's door.

I clasp Lore's wrist, who stares silently at me when I growl, "We're not done talking about this."

"Of course, why don't we continue tonight over tea?"

His attitude truly pisses me off. But then his eyes grow seriously dark. Though Draven has opened the door, Lore doesn't leave. He speaks to me in a growling whisper, "While we're on the subject of family, from this point on, you will keep that axe of yours out of the sight of the children. And this is not up for debate."

"Can I be assured that you and your staff won't do me harm since I'm unarmed?"

Lore laughs. "Oh, my sweet Seren, it's absolutely adorable that you think that axe can save you."

Then he rips his wrist free and steps out the door.

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Ohhhh, our boys getting a little feisty this chapter! What are your thoughts about Seren's past; how he lost his entire family to vampires? Is it right of Lore to agitate Seren this much by bringing up the death of Seren's family or is he pushing it?

9. Ayden Marshalls

Nosa is the capital of Silra, Lore's state. I read a bit about the city during my ride from the Holy Church. Unlike many other towns and cities, there are no laws against vampires or dhampir living here. It also has the lowest number of cathedrals dedicated to the Holy Church out of anywhere else in the continent. That wasn't always the case, but once Lore took over he opened the gates to all manner of beasts. Many of the followers of the Three Mothers moved, which Lore most likely hoped for. Then came families of vampires and dhampir, those who didn't return to Vexsis or were born and raised on Earth.

The forest surrounding Lore's estate has been left behind, replaced by towering metal buildings with crooked chimneys and gray smoke. Cars move through thin streets and above on tracks connected precariously to the towers. Airships travel overhead, casting long shadows across the city. One flies over us now as Draven pushes through the crowd to the taped off home of our victim. Police lift the tape to grant us access, then step in the way of those who try to get closer for a better look.

A young officer comes barreling down the narrow steps of the home. He barely makes it to the sidewalk before vomiting violently. Another officer follows him, shaking his head while patting the boy's back. Finally, mortals. I'm a bit more at ease with them around.

The older officer with a pepper gray mustache notices us and stands tall to say, "Your Grace, I'm glad you could join us."

The young officer somehow manages to gurgle out, "Y-Your Grace?!"

But his stomach hasn't settled because he drops to his knees and throws up a second time. The older officer leaves him to address us.

"Sorry about that," he sighs. "A new recruit who had the worst way to start his training. I warn ya, it's bad in there."

"I've seen many things in my life, Officer Jaryl. Nothing bothers me much anymore." Lore suddenly gestures to me. "I mentioned before that the church was sending a paladin to assist in some of our investigations. Seren, this is Officer Jaryl, our chief investigator."

Jaryl offers his hand to shake. His gray mustache curls like cat whiskers when he smiles. "Pleasure to meet you."

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well. Can you tell us what you know so far?" I ask, walking side by side with Jaryl. Lore and Draven have already made it to the top of the iron staircase.

"The victim is the owner of this house; Ayden Marshalls. He's a secretary for a local law firm. Thirty years old. His brother found him this morning at 8:13am after he didn't arrive at their usual breakfast spot in town. He came to check on him and found Ayden like this--" Jaryl points into the living room where, as he described earlier, a terrifying scene greets us.

Ayden isn't Ayden anymore. He's a mangled corpse strewn across the floor as if he was beneath a giant cement block that scraped him against the road. A vile scene that leaves a bad taste in the back of one's throat. I reacted similarly to the officer when coming upon a scene like this when I was younger. But not anymore.

I maintain an apathetic expression when walking carefully around the scene to examine what remains of the Ayden's head on the floor. Lore does the same, observing half of Ayden's remaining face with an expression mirroring my own. By the sounds of it, neither of us are surprised by much anymore. I've been in the field for over a decade. I've seen more horrors than some can ever imagine. I take in the scene as if it were a painting at an art gallery, searching for meaning in the strokes of red across the floor and splatter on the ceiling.

"Do we have a time of death?" Lore asks, rising to his feet in search of the coroner.

"Based on the lack of divinity in his blood, he died about six hours ago," the coroner replies while walking over to us. "I can also confirm from the blood

stains that he did not die instantly. Whatever took place here happened over the period of one to two hours."

Meaning he was killed around two in the morning, but the torture began around or right after midnight. I'd say this murder could have been done by Lore, seeing as the car clearly left the mansion late last night, but the victim doesn't match the pattern Olere brought up. Ayden Marshalls was a secretary, so not an elite. That doesn't rule out that the church missed something and the killer's open to disposing of others though. I'll make note of this for the church.

While Lore speaks to the coroner and Jaryl, I move on in search of my speciality; monsters. Vampires and dhampir often leave telling traces without realizing it. For example; the toxin produced in their mouth to paralyze their prey, known as blight, leaves trace elements detectable by divinity for hours no matter how much they clean a body. Of course, Ayden doesn't have enough of a corpse left to examine to search for that, but there are other methods. Sometimes a vampire or dhampir gets too excited by the thought of death and salivates like a rabid dog.

I inspect the house from top to bottom for signs of an intruder; traces of toxin, an oddly unlocked window, or the faintest impression of a footprint. Standing on the second floor in the hallway, I lean over to press my palm against the creaking floorboards. I imagine a great ocean, waves drifting over the coast and the taste of salt in the air. The calmer I am, the better the cast will work.

A swift incantation, then my eyes open to see everyone's silhouette overcome by vibrant colors. Each person has a different color. Wherever they step leaves a footprint of their distinguished color. This cast reveals footprints from the last twelve hours, but that's more than enough. I'm able to account for every step from the officers as well as Ayden's. Though deceased, a faint brown color remains over his corpse and is shown through his many steps through the house. But this cast confuses me even more because there are no unaccounted for footprints.

"What discovery troubles you?" Lore attempts to whisper against my ear, but I heard him approaching and managed to pivot on my heel in time to

avoid his whispering assault. He stands close, too close, peering down at me with those electrifying blue eyes. Retreating from him, I blink the cast away, otherwise all the colors will give me a headache.

"Footprints," I say and explain the cast I used. "The only way there are no unaccounted for footprints is if this killer floated through the house or they used divinity to hide their tracks."

"Magic is more believable than a floating killer," Lore replies, no doubt purposefully saying magic instead of divinity. His eyes challenge me to argue. I let the remark slide. I won't argue with this taunting child at a crime scene.

"This means the killer can't be a vampire or dhampir," he adds almost smugly. "We can't use magic."

True. Vampires and dhampir are not blessed with divinity and therefore cannot cast. It's an easy way to detect them seeing as they must go through other means to hide their tracks. This means Lore can't be a suspect even if I'm still suspicious of him. The killer, in this case, is definitely mortal.

Lore heads back to Jaryl to explain what has been determined. I join them to ask, "His Grace mentioned something about there being narcotics found here as well?"

"Yes, upstairs. There was blight hidden under the floorboards in his bedroom," Jaryl explains before guiding us to the kitchen. The toxin he spoke of rests as clear liquid in translucent jars. There's three of them that are all about the size of a salt shaker.

Jaryl grabs a bottle to hand to each of us while saying, "These would have cost a pretty penny. On his budget, I don't see how he got this much unless we found some extra cash stashed away somewhere."

"A few drops of this and he'd be high for at least four hours unless it's diluted. With this much, do you think he was a dealer?" I ask and set the jar aside. Lore continues staring at the blight like he doesn't produce that vile in his mouth.

Blight is meant to calm their prey when vampires bite. In their realm of Vexsis, it does exactly that, although it doesn't have an effect on other vampires or dhampir. However, humans have a more extreme reaction. A vampire bite is euphoric. More addictive than any drug known. It's... indescribable. A straight shot of adrenaline to the veins. Warm enough to ease the muscles without burning. Cold enough to numb the mind without biting. Pure, intense pleasure that lasts hours and never quite leaves your memory. It allows for the unspeakable to happen. Vampires have drained mortals dry while laughing over their deranged giggles and words of thanks because they were too far gone to understand they were being murdered.

I grasp my neck to feel a faint scar that always seems to burn when the mere mention of blight is brought up.

"It's a possibility," Jaryl answers. I quickly drop my hand. Jaryl carefully secures the vials in a box that another investigator brought from outside. "We still have to look into Mr. Marshalls' bank records to check for mysterious transactions or payments. Speak to more friends, family, and coworkers, see if he had the chance to deal anything."

"Do you have seraphics on the force to help you capture this mage?" I ask.

"There are a few mages, but last I heard they're busy on other cases," Lore replies instead. He shows me a smile, then turns it to Jaryl. "Seren and I will be more than happy to search for the killer."

I wouldn't say I'm happy about it, but this does provide more opportunity to observe Lore. Possibly even in a life or death situation.

"If you don't mind, Officer Jaryl, we could start at the law firm. There's a chance he may have met someone there, either to deal with or buy from. If not, we'll have gotten the interviews with his co-workers done," I suggest seeing as Lore didn't ask for my permission first, so I won't ask for his either.

"That'd be great. I'll update you when you return, Your Grace." Jaryl bows his head.

Lore turns to me. I almost expect him to make a snide remark or bicker with me about offering to interview Ayden's co-workers without his permission, but he struts right past me instead.

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Alrighty, we've learned about blight and how vampires actually have a toxin that's meant to numb their prey. What do you think about vampires producing this venom and how it has become a drug? What do you suppose happened to Ayden Marshalls? Our boys have their first case. Let's see how they work together!

10. Confident Cases

Lore waits in the car. I rather not join him, especially after earlier. I claimed that our conversation wasn't finished, but what more is there to say? He doesn't need to know more about my past or my feelings concerning the church, although he can easily guess about the latter. Unfortunately, something tells me that Lore will get more information out of me than I'd like to give. If that's the case, I have to make sure to use those moments to get the truth out of him too. If I can. I'm not exactly the best at mental manipulation. Mind games have never been part of my playbook. I'm more of a " *brute force it"* kind of guy.

Draven steps out of the house shortly after Lore and I left. He heads to the car, likely having received directions to the law firm. I follow and--very reluctantly--slip into the backseat.

"Since I do not know if you have any real experience with criminal investigation, please refrain from giving too many details about Mr. Marshalls' death," Lore says sternly. "The less the public knows the more likely the killer is to make a mistake and admit to something they shouldn't know if we are to interview them."

"I appreciate the advice even if it's obvious, Your Grace," I reply.

Lore clicks his tongue. "Should a paladin be so easy to rile up? I thought you were meant to support peace and love."

"Aren't Lords meant to have better manners? Shouldn't someone have taught you that it's rude to purposefully piss people off?"

Lore chuckles and replies around a wicked grin, "Come now, everyone knows the primary objective of nobility is to piss people off in the most condescendingly polite way possible. I'd like to think that I excel at that."

"I will admit that you certainly do."

Lore gasps in exaggeration. "Careful with your flattery less you win my heart and I don't think the church would condone our union."

Why is he like this? Why couldn't I get a different assignment? Maybe Olere will have me switch places with another paladin if I beg. I'm willing to do it as I've done so before after a local farmer caught me kissing her son, who did not inform me that he was engaged to a very wealthy man. I almost lost my balls that day had I not begged to keep the boys in tact seeing as I hadn't known.

"If I ever got married, I'd want a black wedding," Lore abruptly adds, like this is a perfectly normal conversation to have around an enemy. He proceeds to glance at me with wide, inquisitive eyes.

"I am not having a conversation with you about weddings."

Lore scrunches up his face in seemingly earnest disappointment. "Why not? It's a pleasant and meaningless conversation, or are you not even allowed to do that with a dhampir? What is that, Rule 47 of the Fanatically Juped Handbook?"

"Rule 34 actually."

Lore chuckles. "Are you finally learning to play along?"

"Tolerate is a better description." And further practice meditation. I'll have to make time for it everyday at this rate, otherwise I may actually punch Lore's front teeth out. Not that it'd be an issue for him. They'd grow back in a few hours, if not sooner, which kind of encourages me to just go through with the violent act. At least I'll feel better.

The car comes to a stop a few minutes later in a more upscale district of the city. The brick buildings consist of the finest materials available. Windows trimmed in silver and gold while intricate metal overhangings protect guests at the front doors. Less fog overtakes the sky, cogwheels are concealed by beautiful tapestries or integrated effortlessly into the brick work while couples strut the streets in extravagant garbs, although none as garish as Lore's. He likes the attention, I assume.

Lore informs Draven to wait at the car. He does so without question. Lore and I head into a black building trimmed in deep gold and sparkling windows that overlook a stone square. A man at the front desk explains that Confident Cases, the law firm Ayden worked at, presides on the sixth floor.

I'm once again stuck in an enclosed space with Lore. The elevator's too small and my fingers twitch to grasp the axe on my back or the dagger at my waist. This would be the perfect spot for an ambush, a chance to betray me where I have limited movement. I steady my breathing, lessening the erratic racing of my heart. My eyes scan Lore, watching for any sign of movement. When Lore so much as twitches, I prepare myself for whatever needs to be done.

Memories of the past, of long days spent on the training field with Paladin Nallin flood my mind as they always do during troubling times. She was tough, never let up, and always ensured we understood what we were up against. That sometimes our bodies would be broken, but our minds had to be strong, so we fought through the pain of a broken limb or cracked rib out of sheer will alone. I was battered and bruised more days than not, spitting up blood while facing beasts who wanted to tear me apart. I had to tear them apart first, less they do worse to me and others. I won't let that happen ever again.

The elevator doors open, bringing in a wave of relief. Nothing happened. Admittedly, sometimes my paranoia gets the better of me. On the battlefield it's always better to expect the worst. I suppose I don't know how to leave that behind.

We step out into Confident Cases' lounge area; warm in fall tones such as brown, orange, and soft red. A woman sits at the front desk appearing a little frantic with disheveled hair and crooked glasses.

"Hello." She greets us with a smile. "My name's Marieh, how may I help you?"

"Good morning, Marieh, my name is Lore Seymour--"

Marieh's eyes widen to comical proportions. Her glasses nearly slip off her nose.

"And this is my associate, Seren, a paladin of the Holy Church."

"My gosh, Your Grace, I, uh, good morning!" Marieh bows her head so low she almost slams it against the desk.

Marieh stands up right, clasping her hands in front of her and standing stiff as a board when Lore says, "We've come bearing unfortunate news concerning Ayden Marshalls."

"Ayden?" She echoes, growing immediately concerned. "Is he alright? He didn't show up for work this morning. I've been calling him all day."

"Unfortunately, Mr. Marshalls passed away this morning."

"Holy Mothers." Marieh gapes while pressing a hand over her chest. "What... what happened?"

"Officers continue to investigate the crime scene, but there is suspicion of foul play. We've been sent to ask his co-workers a few questions if you wouldn't mind making some time for us today in your busy schedule."

"Oh, of course not, I... Ayden, wow," she whispers, sounding genuinely surprised.

"Did you know him well?" I ask, bringing her attention to me. Her tense shoulders relax. Her fingers tinker with a familiar necklace once tucked under her blouse. Another Faithful, this interview should go smoothly.

"I'm not sure if you could call it well. Ayden has worked here for about ten years and I've only been here for two. We conversed like any other co-workers, asked about each other's day or made small talk in the break room. Not much more than that," she replies.

"Was that the usual for Ayden? Did he ever try to become closer to his coworkers?"

Marieh hums, then shakes her head. "No, he was always very quiet, polite, and reserved. Definitely a hard worker, he was much better up here than I am. He reminded us all about our appointments, easily handled affairs, and often attended business meetings with Mr. Bellvitz."

"Mr. Bellvitz being the owner of the law firm?" Lore inquires.

Marieh nods. "Yes, oh, he'll want to learn about this right away. We've all been concerned about Ayden since this morning. He never missed work before, even if he had a cold."

"One last question, if you wouldn't mind," I say. "Could you think of anyone who would want to harm Ayden?"

"Certainly not," she replies with a firm shake of her head. "Ayden never caused any trouble, well, at least not here at the office. No one here dislikes him either. Of course, I can't speak for him outside of work, but he really did seem like a very nice man."

Lore nods and gestures to the couches in the lounge. "We'll have a seat while you contact Mr. Bellvitz. If he has time, we'd appreciate having a word."

"Of course." Marieh nods while reaching for the phone. Lore and I take a seat on the couch. Lore continues to observe the firm like he expects to find a hidden chamber filled with all the answers we seek. I, too, have always hoped to find the cheesy villain lair, but alas, it eludes the both of us.

"She seems genuine," Lore says after a few moments. He turns his quiet gaze back on Marieh. "I didn't sense a lie in her pulse."

"Some people are very good at keeping themselves composed under pressure."

"True."

"Your Grace." Marieh stands and gestures to a pair of double doors leading further into the office. "Mr. Bellvitz will see you now. If you'd follow me."

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Seren and Lore bickering is my fav, but y'all should know by now that bickering is my fav in general lol Seren already wants another assignment, will he actually request to leave? Will these two be able to solve the case without causing harm to each other?

11. The Hunt

Marieh guides us through the thin halls overcome by offices. Dark doors lay closed with golden plaques denoting who works where. Mr. Bellvitz' office sits at the furthest end of the floor. Marieh opens a pair of black double doors into a lounge area with a wall of windows overlooking the city. The airship station's viewable from here; the hustle and bustle of city life and ships rising into a murky sky.

Mr. Bellvitz sits at a wide, neat desk without a single paper or gadget out of place. Even the books on his shelves are color coordinated, although they're mostly dull in shades. Everything has a place and everything is in its place, including his tailored clothes and slicked back peppered gray hair.

"Your Grace." Mr. Bellvitz bows before stepping around the desk to offer Lore his hand. He smiles like a businessman, not quite reaching his eyes, and yet not disinterested or impolite. "It's an honor to officially meet you, although I wish it were under better circumstances. I can't believe what happened to Ayden. He was a kind man and an invaluable worker here at Confident Cases."

"I'm also sorry to meet under these circumstances, Mr. Bellvitz," Lore replies, shaking Mr. Bellvitz' hand firmly.

"Please, call me Ikehn."

"Ikehn, then. Would it be alright if we had a quick word with you concerning Mr. Marshalls?"

"Of course. Please, have a seat." Ikehn gestures to the couches facing one another. A single coffee table sits between them, as neatly organized and clean as the rest of the office. "Marieh, would you make us some tea?"

Nodding, Marieh swiftly exits. The four of us take our seats where Lore immediately asks the basic questions we asked Marieh earlier. Ikehn replies similarly. Ayden started working for Confident Cases around 10 years ago.

He was a hard worker, quiet, mostly kept to himself, and no one knew much about what he did outside of work. He never caused any trouble, but when Lore gets around to asking about if anyone would do him harm, Ikehn has a different response.

"We have a variety of lawyers here representing divorcees to murder suspects. Often, there are a few unsavory characters coming in and out of the office," Ikehn says before sipping from the tea Marieh brought in a moment ago. He gently puts the cup down without making a clink. Something I've never achieved, although Lore pulls the move off too so I end up holding onto my tea cup out of sheer embarrassment. Damn these rich boys and their manners.

"Are you implying Ayden may have upset the wrong person at work?" I ask, clasping my cup in my lap.

Humming, Ikehn takes a brief moment of consideration prior to responding, "I'm not sure if he upset anyone as there has never been an argument that I know of. However, I wouldn't rule out the possibility that a client could have seen him as an easy target. My workers have received death threats from unhappy clients and we've had to call security against some who didn't have a handle on their anger. Once or twice we've also had thefts from our own homes by clients or those on bad terms with said clients."

"Are there any clients that come to mind that you think would have harmed Ayden?" Lore asks.

Ikehn frowns apologetically. "Unfortunately, I cannot divulge specific information. I can, however, offer a list of clients we are or have worked with prior, if that would be of assistance. You can find what you can on them yourselves."

"That would be incredibly useful, thank you."

"I'll have Marieh compile a list for you." Ikehn rises when we do, offering another handshake and a polite smile. "Sorry that I couldn't be of more help."

"You've done more than enough."

With that, Ikehn takes us back to the front desk. He says his goodbyes and leaves us with Marieh, who almost drowns in boxes after retrieving client lists. She fumbles through them until I offer to help. Her grateful smile speaks volumes and may lead to Lore offering his assistance as well.

As expected, the information on the lists is limited. We have their names and addresses. Anything more will have to be requested from the police department.

"There are hundreds, if not a thousand names here," I say while carrying my half of the boxes towards the elevator. We spent a further hour interviewing the remaining staff who had nothing more to give. Well, except the one woman who had a lot of fluttering eyelashes to give Lore and another worker who kept staring at me like I kicked their puppy or just bought them a puppy. It was a difficult expression to explain and process.

"Better to have suspects than none at all," Lore replies, not seeming to dread the paperwork nearly as much as I am. I've never been a paperwork kind of guy or someone who can sit at a desk. My duty lies on the field, not trapped between pages threatening papercuts.

Speaking of duties, I glance curiously at Lore once in the elevator, which doesn't go unnoticed.

"You're staring," he states, then points his nose high in exaggerated confidence. "While I understand how challenging it must be to turn away from a sight as captivating and dazzling as myself, staring is quite rude and it's making me uncomfortable."

"Here I thought nothing could make you uncomfortable," I grumble under my breath. For some reason, Lore smirks. I haven't the heart to ask why. Instead, I ask what was previously on my mind, "Why do you do this?"

"What?"

"As Lord of Silra, your duties lie in overseeing this kind of work; approving a warrant or requesting investigative help from neighboring cities. Why are you out here doing the leg work? You could sit safely at your office and spend more time with your kids. Why walk the streets and endanger yourself?"

I watch Lore carefully for a reaction. Dhampir or not, he isn't invincible. No one is. Going against a mage could be serious trouble for him seeing as he can't use magic. Lore's file said his trait, which all vampires and dhampir have and changes based on the individual, was power absorption. The church isn't aware how much of that power can be released and is fairly certain it doesn't work on living beings. That may not work very well against a mage, who has a plethora of attacks that could defend against mere bursts of energy, thus putting him in even more danger.

"That's quite a silly question coming from you of all people," Lore replies. He smiles teasingly, but his eyes do not mirror the sentiment when he whispers darkly, "I like the hunt."

The elevator doors open. He steps out without another word. I can't determine whether he was serious or not and, if it is the truth, whether that makes him more of a suspect.

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Hmm, *is* Lore being serious? And could a client of Confident Cases have been the Ayden's Killer? Tune in next time to possibly find out or wait 10 chapters 'cause I don't know how to write mysteries, but here I am putting a bit in. No harm in trying, yeah? lol

12. Suspect Seven

Back at the precinct, a few officers assist us in combing through the client list, searching through their crimes so we may make a list of suspects.

"Since the killer tortured Ayden, but was capable of intelligently cleaning up after themselves, we should rule out those who are exceedingly violent. This killer is someone capable of containing their emotions until the time is right. It's more likely they'll have a smaller charge or something completely unrelated to assault," I remark when we begin compiling lists of most likely and least likely.

As thoughtful as I believed my statement to be, no one immediately listens. All eyes turn to Lore, who leans comfortably on the chair across from me. He silently reads through one paper after the other faster than I can read a paragraph. Then he looks up, realizes everyone is staring, and smiles, "Seren's right. Separate the suspects based on the severity of their crime, then we'll give it another look after we're done."

Everyone gets to work immediately. What a way to remind me that Lore has the precinct in the palm of his hand. That could be another reason he's so involved. His assistance makes their jobs easier, which makes them like him more. He seems to truly excel at that above all us; charming everyone.

There isn't a damn thing about him that doesn't scream suspect. There also isn't a damn solid piece of proof that does scream suspect either. Setting such thoughts aside--for now--I fixate on the case at hand. With the help of a handful of others, we manage to work up multiple lists by the middle of the afternoon.

"Draven shall keep an eye on these few," Lore says when handing the freakishly quiet butler a stack of papers. I wonder if Draven forgets at times that his vocal cords work. I'd ask, but if he remembers, then I'd have to hear him talk. Lore's already a handful. No need to add another.

"It's unlikely they're the perpetrator we're searching for, but just in case, we'll have a pair of eyes on them. And these--" Lore slaps his hand on a large stack that, admittedly, makes me a little excited. "You and I will take care of, my sweet Seren."

I scowl at the notion of being called sweet and his, but am eager to get to work.

"We'll see if any of them are the perp or know anything that may lead us in the right direction. We can at least get through a few today," he finishes. I choose not to mention what he said, otherwise we'll look like a bickering couple. Definitely not on my to do list.

Although we're meant to interrogate, I imagine there will be less talking than earlier. I'd prefer chasing some jerk down an alley or getting into a fist fight. All this polite chatting is boring and feels like we're getting nowhere. I don't understand how priests or surveyors of the church can withstand all this small talk and inaction. My legs have been jittery for hours. I guess one could say I enjoy the hunt too. Having anything in common with Lore is slightly unsettling though.

Draven disappears instantly, leaving Lore with the car keys. Guess Draven has to hop his way across the rooftops while Lore drives us through the streets, which is a funny thought.

At least Lore's quiet during the drive, which starts to concern me when I consider why. Is he such a bad driver that he can't talk?

My question is somewhat answered when I cling to the car door for my life as Lore runs through a red light and laughs, "My apologies, you'd think a dhampir would have better eyesight."

"Haha, yeah--" We serve around a sharp corner that has my head banging against the window.

"My humblest of apologies."

"You don't sound apologe--gah!" I almost hit the dash when he slams on the breaks to prevent us from running over an old lady crossing the street. If he isn't a murderer, he's about to be with these kinds of driving skills!

Luckily, for all our lives, we arrive at our destination without incident; a loan company. In short, loan sharks, who are very surprised to see the Lord of Silra accompanied by a paladin of the Holy Church stepping through their front door. Before any of the fecal matter present can form a cohesive sentence, one particular pile of shit launches himself out the open second story window. That one happened to be the man we're looking for.

Lore whistles. "That one's spry."

I'm on the run in an instant, hopping out of the window after the man hobbling down the street. He must have landed on his ankle wrong. The perp disappears around a corner. I follow. When I grow near, he grabs a nearby girl and throws her in my path. She screams, then screams once more when I catch her and shout, "Sorry, pardon me!"

This is much more what I'm meant for. A chase through the streets as some idiot desperately tries to escape. The dodging of one person after the next. Skidding down an alley where the lights flicker. My legs push faster and his back grows closer. One more frantic look over his shoulder, then I tackle him. He grunts when we hit the ground, skidding across the damp cement. I rather not ask why it is damp because it hasn't rained recently.

"Get off me!" the man shouts, attempting to dig his elbow into my gut. I grasp his wrist and pin his arm to his back. He howls, acting like I just broke both his legs and two ribs. Which I can do easily if he's so inclined.

"Get off, get off!" he repeats, snarling.

"You wouldn't be here if you hadn't run," Lore says, appearing at the end of the alley. I don't recall hearing him chase after us, but dhampir are naturally quicker than mortals. A few hops across the rooftops would have been easy enough for him, and even more hilarious than the thought of Draven possibly doing that earlier.

Lore steps closer until he's in the man's face, leaning in to say, "We simply have a few questions."

The man isn't eager to comply and neither are the next six suspects we manage to get our hands on. All of them attempt to escape in their own ways. One slid down a trash shoot, which was the only time I didn't follow and happily suggested Lore take the reins on this one. He did not, instead choosing to flick his hair over his shoulder and reply haughtily, *"Certainly not. Do you have any idea how much I'm worth right now?"*

Unfortunately, none of the suspects have much information to give. None even knew who Ayden was. Two had perfect alibi's and four of the six aren't mages. We're both thinking we're back to square one until we grab suspect number seven, the last of the night.

"Th-that's not mine! Someone must have put that on me!" Suspect Seven wheezes from the corner of an alley after he, too, tried to run. He lasted a block, then dropped. In doing so, a half empty bottle of blight slipped out of his pocket.

"I swear that's not mine," he repeats. His shaking hands and wide eyes say otherwise. He can't take his gaze off the bottle, whimpering when Lore pops open the cap to smell it.

"This is dhampir toxin. It isn't as strong, but also isn't the diluted kind we found at Ayden's," he whispers and offers it to me. I instinctively take a swift step back, then grab the bottle to inspect it. His eyes narrow in silent questioning, but he says nothing.

"Where'd you get this?" I ask while tipping the bottle slightly so the blight threatens to spill over. My own mind reels at the thought of wasting it, then I swallow hard and forget the memories of euphoria and fear in a cold metal room.

"Don't! Come on, that's... it's not..." Suspect Seven twists his hands together and gulps. He screams, then lunges at me when I let the smallest drop fall out of the bottle. Lore grabs Seven's coat to throw him back like he weighs nothing.

"Tell us where you got this and I'll give the bottle back," I say.

Seven groans, continuing to contemplate how to save his precious blight, before giving in, "I don't know much, ok?! I can say that the blight scene has been pretty heavy around here lately, so there's a bunch of ways to get it. A few years ago, you couldn't find a decent batch that didn't cost an arm and a leg. I don't know what changed or where it's coming from, but there are a few, uh... clubs where they offer *unique* services. That's--that's where I got it."

I glance at Lore who reveals a bit more than he may have planned in that angered expression of his. The once nearly luminescent blue of his eyes darkens nearly black. The bridge of his nose wrinkles like a lion eyeing their prey.

We both know what kind of club and *unique services* the suspect speaks of. That the most likely workers are dhampir, who probably aren't doing it of their own free will. After all, from what I've heard of the sex ring, dhampir are considered exotic goods. Not quite vampire. not quite mortal. And not as often found. A perfect way for both sides to get a taste while continuing to hate each other.

Lore's lips twitch, revealing the fangs beneath. Then he sighs and blinks away the enraged expression like it was never there.

"We appreciate your cooperation," he says almost too sweetly, like his words are coated in tainted sugar, then grabs the bottle to pour the blight down a sewer drain.

"No!" Seven screams, scrambling to the drain. I gag when he actually leans over to lick up the drops that hit the drain. He glares at Lore with wild eyes. "You said you'd give it back!"

"I believe he said we'd give the *bottle* back." Lore hands Seven the empty bottle, practically challenging him to attack. He's smart not to or terrified enough not to because Lore's smile is anything but friendly.

"Now, tell us where this club is," Lore adds.

Seven makes the smartest decision of the night by not hesitating to tell him.

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Haha, poor Seren. Lore may actually kill him with his bad driving skills! So our two boys have done some interviewing and learned a bit of something, but does it have anything to do with Ayden's death? How do you feel about what you learned concerning dhampir and how they're viewed by society?

If you're interested in chatting with me, other authors, and other readers, then join The Literary Lounge Discord server. I've left an external link and will leave a link on my dashboard as well. We can chat about this story or whatever one you like and you can make friends with other readers and authors!

13. Banking Records

Lore and I sit in the silent parked car for a solid six minutes and forty three seconds. I've been counting because I swear Lore has never been this quiet for this long. I'm beginning to wonder if this is a health concern. Little time spent together has already informed me that this isn't the norm.

After Suspect Seven left, we came straight to the car where Lore now sits in the driver's seat. His hands rest on the wheel like he's relaxed, but the chill in the air says otherwise.

"It's getting late," I finally speak but do not earn his attention. His gaze remains locked outside. "We've done more than enough today. Let's head back to the precinct and inform Jaryl of what we've learned. It'd be better to leave the *club* to him, seeing as it may not be connected to Ayden at all."

Lore faces me with an apathetic expression that's honestly impressive. From his reaction earlier, I expected unbridled rage. An actor shows only what they want to show and Lore has been an exceptional actor ever since I arrived.

"He told us there are plenty of ways to get blight. The kind he had didn't even match up to Ayden's. We will look for the killer and some officers can keep their eyes on the club," I continue. None of which Lore seems to be alright with. Something tells me, if it were up to him, he'd set fire to the club right here and now.

If I weren't here, would he actually go through with it?

"You're clearly upset," I add, to which he raises a brow, continuing to successfully act alright. "And I'm sure you don't want to miss having dinner with the kids."

That eases the tension in his hands, enough for him to flex his fingers and likely return the feeling to them. He sighs, then starts the car while

grumbling, "Fine. After we tell Officer Jaryl what we discovered, we'll head back."

Oddly enough, a silent car ride is far worse than a talkative one. Dare I say it, quiet Lore feels like a crime against nature. Tack that onto his horrid driving skills and this is an experience I'll never forget, in a very bad way.

"If none of the clients from Confident Cases lead us to the killer, that could mean Ayden's death has nothing to do with the blight discovered at his place. He just had it. Perhaps an estranged family member with a grudge to pay?" I ask, more like whimper from the very sudden turning of the car that almost gives me whiplash. My stomach doesn't feel all that great either.

"Maybe," he replies, but gives nothing more.

I don't bother trying to talk again either. He has made it clear he doesn't want to. Besides, I'm likely the last person he wants to converse with. A paladin of the church who has actively hunted down his kind. To him, I may be worse than those at the brothels seeking *exotic* entertainment. Brothels like that reside all over the kingdom, all over the world actually. They're a sort of "unspoken tale." Nearly everyone knows about them, but doesn't want to bring up the harsh and cruel truth. Both sides rather lie even to themselves than admit what they truly desire.

We arrive at the precinct where I fill Jaryl in on what we learned. Lore's mostly silent in his seat, only chiming in when I mention watching the club.

"It's likely the workers aren't there of their own volition. Should there be any reason for officers to enter, inform them to be careful and treat the sex workers with care," Lore states in a way that informs everyone this isn't up for debate. Not that I imagine Jaryl would have any argument.

"The club may have nothing to do with Mr. Marshalls' death, but it could clue us in on this up and coming trade of blight and whether it has any ties to the Red Moon group. We have to treat this with the utmost care," I add to which Jaryl nods.

"Don't worry, Your Grace. We'll handle this," he says, then grabs a few papers that were sitting on his desk. Lore retrieves them, holding them out for me to view too. "While you were gone, we did some digging into Ayden's back records. We heard from a family member that he opened a second bank account at the one they worked for. He kept depositing large sums of money that he could not have received from working as a secretary."

"His place didn't exactly scream that he had this kind of cash either," I remark, glancing over the records while recalling the interior of Ayden's place. He had everything he needed and barely anything more. "And it looks like he was withdrawing money regularly."

"Yes, withdrawing and sending it to a woman up north. I made a call to the precinct in her district to bring her in for questioning. They haven't gotten a hold of her yet. We may not hear from them until later tonight or even tomorrow."

"Are there any files on this woman? Do we know who she is?" I inquire.

"No, but we have her name; Sulli Harolds. There's no mention of her in anything Ayden owns and we asked family members, but they never heard of her."

"Considering she's a woman he is sending money to, it could be child support," Lore says while returning the records to Jaryl.

Jaryl nods. "That's what we were thinking, but if it is, we have no proof yet."

"Regardless, that extra cash proves Ayden was more likely dealing blight than using it," I add.

"Hopefully we'll get more answers soon. I'll give you a call as soon as I hear back about Sulli Harolds, Your Grace."

Nodding, Lore stands. Jaryl does the same, bowing his head as Lore leaves without a word. I swiftly follow him while searching the precinct for our

red-haired companion, even if I'm quite alright with spending less time around him.

"Where's Draven?" I ask when we reach the car.

Lore throws open the driver's door. "Out. He'll return to the manor when he's finished."

We slip into the car together where Lore revs the engine. Before he can slam his foot on the gas, I shout, "Wait!"

He stares at me wide-eyed, his foot hovering above the pedal and leg slightly shaking from the weird angle. I grins sheepishly and say, "I'd like to make a stop first."

"If it's at a church--"

"No, uh, it's actually somewhere that I'd like your advice on."

Lore's confusion amplifies ten fold. He searches the vehicle like he expects that to answer his unasked questions.

"What sort of snacks or toys do you think the children would like?" I ask, dreading the question immediately. Lore stares for a long moment, then howls with laughter. His eyes crinkle into crescent moons when he laughs like that. I shrivel up in place, leaning away from him when he looks my way.

"And why do you want to stop at a toy store? Do you need a teddy to hold through the cold nights? If that's the case..." He leans in, deep blue eyes ensnaring my own. Every word brushes against my cheeks. "I volunteer for the position."

I swallow back the agreement that nearly slipped out and shove his face away.

"What's wrong with your hearing? It's obviously not for me. It's for the children, as an apology for scaring them," I explain.

Lore does me a favor by going back to his designated side of the car, although even that is too close for comfort. My mind wanders, noting Lore's joyous laughter that made me want to join in, made me want to hear it again.

"Is this your attempt to make the children like you? Bribe them with snacks and gifts?" Lore chuckles more and rests a hand over his heart as if to ease the pain. "Silly Seren, what could you give them that I, a Lord, cannot?"

That... is an excellent question, but it's not the point!

"I'm not trying to win them over from you. Like I said, it's an apology, so are you going to help or not?" I cross my arms and glare at him, wishing he'd speak sooner. I can't stand being under his scrutiny for extended periods of time. The way he looks at me is... unsettling.

"Fine." Lore steps on the gas. I grip the car door for my life. "I'll be kind and assist you in this trying endeavor."

"The only trying endeavor is surviving your piss poor driving skills!"

"Like you could do any better."

"Let's change seats and find out!"

Lore laughs and pushes on the gas harder.

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Hmm, who could this mysterious woman be that Ayden's sending money to? And will Lore actually help Seren find something to buy for the kids as an apology or is he just gonna be a pain in the ass the whole time? (I think we all know the answer to that lol)

14. Being a Father

We survive the drive to a local street that Lore describes as being the perfect spot to shop for the children. I find that to be true when I get out and see that both sides of the streets are made up of candy shops and toy stores. They stand multiple stories high. Long windows line the exterior, showing off the gems inside. Life-like teddy bears adorned by silk ribbons sit in windows and train sets the entire length of a first floor riding across the ceilings. I know without stepping inside that this is all very much out of my price range. The entire side of town is likely out of my price range.

"Your Grace," I call to which Lore circles the vehicle to stand beside me. I offer up a smile that feels more like a grimace. "Are there any cheaper establishments?"

Lore has proven once more that he is an excellent noble because he does seriously piss me off without much effort.

"My apologies, Seren, I thought the Holy Church would pay their paladins better. How unfortunate that you aren't appreciated as much as you should be," he gasps like he has stumbled across something terrifying. He might do exactly that after I cut off all that long hair of his and toss it in the sewer!!

"Unfortunately, my children have become rather spoiled and likely won't react well to a cheaper gift," he gives a bullshit lie. There were plenty of toys at the house that were likely grabbed at a small market stand simply because it was cute.

"Let me assist you in earning the children's affections again. I will happily cover whatever you cannot," he adds around a beaming smile that makes me want to slap it off his stupid face. That stupid face continues to grin when walking confidently to the nearest toy store.

"Your Grace, welcome!" A woman calls from the counter. She rushes over with the enthused steps of someone who knows they're about to get a lot of

money. "What can we help you with today?"

"Oh, I'm just looking for a few things for the kids," Lore replies. The woman, likely the owner, glances at me. Her eyes widen in surprise. I suppose that's not a strange response. I doubt Lore has walked around with members of the Holy Church before. Unless their head happened to be on the end of a pike.

"Well, if you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask," the woman says, then glances at me again prior to walking away.

What? Does she think I'm going to try and steal something!? Honestly, I would have to in a place like this because the smallest teddy bear I pick up costs more than what I have. What is this thing made out of? Pure silk with golden threads and sapphire eyes?! Is that even child safe? Leave it to a child of nobility to choke to death on a sapphire.

"Getting a present for only one of the kids is probably not the best idea, is it?" I ask, continuing to pick up toys to inspect the very large price tags. If Lore buys things like this regularly, he truly is loaded. That makes me hate him more. Who needs or deserves that kind of money? I'll let it slide since he clearly spends a lot on the children, but his definitely overflowing bank accounts still pisses me off.

"Maybe we should head over to a candy store so I can get a bag that they can share," I suggest.

"Sure, we can do that, but since we're here--" Lore eagerly points at a few toys for the workers to grab and wrap. "We might as well purchase a few things. Oh, Oliver would like that!"

Lore hurries over to the other side of the store and I awkwardly follow. This place terrifies me. I'm worried I'll trip on something, break it, and owe them my life.

Lore proceeds to easily procure toys for the children, all the while explaining which toy is for who and why. Oliver apparently sleeps on a bed of stuffed animals and wishes to add more to his already endless collection.

Ashby likes picture books, specifically those about plants. Ashley wants and needs toys that are not easily destroyed, often preferring toy swords and shields. Nalo likes music and has a collection of music boxes that he sometimes uses as a small orchestra. Hyun Woo would draw all day if he could, so art supplies it is. Reegan loves space and science, similar to Cyan, so Lore claims he's their future trouble maker. Isabella has recently become interested in making clothes and Darika just wants new clothes.

Once we're done at the toy store, Lore shoves me towards a dress shop around the block. He stands in front of a row of dresses donning a very serious expression, acting like this is a life or death situation. Our whole shopping experience he has been either excited or serious and... damn it all, why does he have to seem like such a good dad? *And he's hot* --I mean, he's rich and capable of caring for his children so that's simply unfair.

"Have you always wanted to be a father?" I ask without realizing it.

Lore's as surprised as I am when he faces me. His lack of response has me fumbling through a weak explanation, "T-To be more specific, did you adopt because you wanted a family or because you have the money and status to do some good for some children in need?"

Ugh, his answer will make him look like a good guy regardless. Then again, the simple truth could be that Lore isn't who the church is looking for. He's a suspect, but not necessarily the culprit, although he still goes against everything I've ever learned. This feels like a test of faith from the Mothers. Much like we were tested a thousand years ago when vampires first arrived. I won't fall prey like our ancestors did. I can't fail my family.

Lore picks two dresses for Darika that the workers take away to wrap. He sits next to me, resting his elbows on the armchair and his hands clasped in front of him.

"I wanted a family," he admits, surprising me. I was starting to suspect he would avoid the topic.

"I never had a real family. I know what happens at orphanages. I know what happens to the *lucky* orphans adopted by *gracious* lords, ladies, or lieges,"

he adds. There's a peculiar lilt to his voice, like he's straining himself to keep a monster at bay. But the tone disappears as quickly as it arrived. "I had a chance to do better, to give children like me a happier life and, hopefully, protect them."

I wish I could take what he said at face value. The children seem genuinely happy at Lore's side, but I've witnessed many happy people whose lives are taken by those they thought they could trust. A vampire father who drained the blood and life from the veins of his first love. A dhampir child killing their own parents. A vampire caretaker slaughtering entire families for the simple taste of blood. People we thought we could trust, suddenly become the ones we fear most.

Deep down, I know my heart aches for whatever Lore went through. I know that I want him to be speaking the truth, if only for the children to be guaranteed the happiness they deserve. But a life of chaos and misery has beaten much of the optimism out of me. I know better. I know what the future holds for them, regardless of who they are now. In the end, chaos always wins.

"What a pity," Lore adds, his serious tone replaced with a mocking one. "If only there were one so kind to have done the same for you. Instead, the church found you and turned you into yet another soldier to impose their wrath upon the world."

And I should have known this is the turn the conversation would have taken. He never misses an opportunity.

"This could have been a moment where I began to see you in a different light, but you've ruined it by being an asshole," I snap out a lie, glaring at Lore's twisted smile.

"I'm not foolish enough to believe there will ever be a moment you will see me in a different light," he says and rises from his chair when the workers announce his packages are ready. Lore adjusts his jacket while staring down at me. "Unless the moment comes when you finally see the light at all."

I roll my eyes. The light he speaks of is darkness disguised as something better. Our ancestors fell for it and we lost hundreds of thousands of innocent lives to the cruelty of vampires. I won't be like them.

Lore has the car packed while I carry a dingy little bag of candy that I realize I shouldn't haven't bothered getting. The children will quickly forget my peace offering once they see what their Papa brought.

...he did it on purpose again, didn't he?

"Ah, there is one more thing we should do while we're out," Lore adds.

"Does it involve another purchase because I fear there is no room?" I gesture to the car that's stuffed beyond capacity. The only remaining spots are the front seats.

Lore holds up a single finger. "One more purchase. I insist."

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Tehehe, Lore certainly knows how to push Seren's buttons! What do you think about Lore wanting a family? Where could they be going to next? Reminder; my patreon is 15 episodes ahead with 5 extra chapters only available there :)

15. Grateful for Robes

Somehow, the car survives the perilous drive down a few blocks to the next store. I'm shocked the vehicle can carry this kind of weight or that the windows don't bust from the sheer velocity Lore uses when going around turns. I don't recall there being any vehicular manslaughters in his records, but I get the feeling there should be.

Lore's insistence takes us to another clothes parlor. The owner recognizes him immediately, greeting Lore with that familiar *"I'm-about-to-get-rich"* grin.

"Your Grace, welcome, welcome!" he exclaims, making me wonder if he'd be as excited by the prospect of a dhampir purchasing a suit if he wasn't a lord. The familiar necklace around the owner's neck points to him disliking dhampir as much as I do, but the saying is true; money rules the world.

"My apologies, did you happen to call in an order earlier? I don't recall hearing of your arrival," the owner says, keeping his gaze fixated on the literal gem in his store.

"No, this was a spur of the moment decision. I've come to procure him a few suits," Lore says, causing me to pivot away from the illustrious suits to gape at the one foolish enough to make such an offer.

"Me? What for?" I point at myself in utter shock and slight terror. These fine garbs are worth more than my monthly salary! The thought of wearing any of them makes my knees shake. I know I'll get them dirty and, oh mothers, the cost of the dry cleaning!! I feel faint.

Lore steps over donning a disgusted scowl. He pinches the shoulder of my robe to tug like it's a piece of scum. "These rags are acceptable for certain circumstances, but there are events that I'm sure you will insist on attending that require more appropriate attire. Besides," Lore's long fingers slip

around my neck that trembles beneath the touch. "These robes aren't doing you any favors."

Thankfully for my sanity, Lore retreats, allowing the owner to rush over. His hand grasping my arm brings me back to reality, reminds me that I should have slapped Lore's hand away or at least showed a reaction other than standing there forgetting to breathe.

"Excuse me," the owner says while gesturing to a nearby door. "Please allow us to take your measurements. While we do so, His Grace may look through a few of the options we have available."

"Why don't I get to cho--" I'm cut short by the owner swiftly dragging me towards the door. His eagerness to please Lore puts my desires on the back burner. Actually, they may not even be on a burner, probably tossed to the floor to be forgotten about and dragged off by a rat.

I'm thrust into a closet where the owner and another worker take my measurements. Dare I say it, this may be the strangest thing I've ever done. Never thought the day would come when two strange men would be rolling tape measures around me and finnicking with my robes to get proper numbers. Once they're done, I'm taken back to Lore, who sits comfortably in a velvet chair. A wrack sits next to him already containing a few suits. He sets aside a catalog to face me.

"There are a few suits already here that you can try on, Seren," he states. I contemplate whether that's up for debate.

I approach Lore, leaning over him to whisper, "Do I have a say in any of this? Because I've never worn a suit, never thought I would, and would much rather wear my church garbs. I am a paladin of the Holy Church--"

"And they dress you in rags," Lore interrupts. He even tugs on the ropes around my waist, nearly undoing them if I hadn't grabbed them fast enough. He smirks. "As I said, there may be times where a suit is necessary. I'll purchase three or four for you. If it bothers you so much, you may leave them at the manor after you've gone. I'll donate them."

We stare at one another long enough for my lungs to ache because, apparently, having prolonged eye contact with him has that effect.

Grumbling, I give in and Lore eagerly points at the first suit to try on. I'm dragged away to change, but they at least give me privacy to do so. It takes me longer than expected. Why are there, like, a bajillion pieces to a suit?! Shouldn't there be pants, a shirt, and a jacket?! This is too complicated. No wonder nobles take an eternity to get ready. There must be an entire handbook on how to wear every article of clothing!

After battling to get dressed, I'm taken back to Lore. This time, he grows still. I'd like to think he's overcome by disgust, if only to ease the sudden tension in my gut and the voice in the back of my mind. His deep blue eyes linger on me long enough to warm my face, then he stands.

I'm not sure what to do when he grabs my arms to inspect the length of the jacket, then walks around while running his finger over the length of my shoulders. I try not to visibly shiver by stabbing my nails into the palm of my hands.

"That's much better," he says, guiding me over to a full length mirror. He at least let me keep the colors of the church; white, blue, and gold. Though the suit is slightly too big, it still hugs me in ways that make me unrecognizable.

Lore stands behind me, adjusting the jacket a bit more while making a few remarks to the tailor.

"I'm not a doll," I grumble at him when he pinches the jacket at my waist.

"I know. Dolls don't talk." Probably to bug me more, he plays with my hair. I smack his hand away and try not to stare at myself any longer in the mirror. I don't recognize the man looking back at me. I'm not sure how to feel about him.

Lore eases up on the teasing while I try on the other two suits. In the end, he agrees to purchase all three of them. The owner promises they'll be ready in

a few days. I wish it'd take longer, if only so it'd be more likely for Lore to forget.

"Stop acting like I've asked for the life of your first born child," Lore says after we step out of the shop. I'm glad to be back in my robes. They feel like home.

"They're a few suits for certain occasions that may not even turn up, depending on how swiftly you get your job done," he adds while facing me. The sight of me makes him scowl, which in turn makes me scowl.

"What?" I growl, feeling like he's challenging me.

He gives a disappointed sigh. "You were much sexier in a suit."

"S-S-Se--" I can't even get the word out, not that Lore gives me the time to do so. He sighs a second time, head lowered while he struts to the car like he didn't just call me, practically a mortal enemy, sexy!

He's doing this to rile me up, to make me uncomfortable or even enforce a false notion that he's not a vicious killer beneath all that grandeur. Although I've yet to come across proof of his murderous tendencies, but a dhampir is a dhampir through and through. Even if he hasn't done anything recently, the story of his adoptive family makes one wonder. How did they all die in such a short span of time, then leave everything to him? It's suspicious. Lore seems to be the type whose secrets have secrets and I've yet to even get a glimpse of the answers.

However, he really is great with the children, like, stupidly wonderful as a father. The townspeople don't appear to dislike him. He works hard alongside the local police force to protect the civilians when he could easily sit at home munching on grapes and blood cocktails, or whatever dhampir like to snack on. And Silra's a well known state among the world for being relatively peaceful--wait... why am I complimenting him so much? Gah!

Grumbling, I'm about to join Lore in the car when a man turns the corner at the end of the street screaming, "Help! Help me, please!"

There's blood splatter on his shirt. His frantic eyes meet mine. Apparently, this is one of Silra's not-so-peaceful moments.

"Paladin!" He cries, running faster towards me. With tears in his eyes, he points over his shoulder and screams so loud his voice cracks, "A vampire. A vampire attacked!"

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I can't help myself. I'm a sucker for buying each other clothes. Lore and Soran have a lot in common in that department lol Sue me! Anywho, Lore has bought Seren some suits, but Seren's not entirely comfortable in them. Will he ever wear them? How the hell is he meant to act after being called ~sexy~ by a "mortal enemy"? And uh oh, there has been a vampire attack! What's going to happen next? o.o

16. Wolves Hunt Sheep

"Were you bitten?" I ask, grasping the man to inspect for injury. None of the blood belongs to him.

"No, no, but someone was. A co-worker and I took a shortcut home through an alley and she came out of nowhere!" The man exclaims. Another scream bellows from the street he originated from.

"What did she look like? What direction did she go in?"

"Uh, I don't know. It happened so fast, um, she... she had black hair, red eyes, and I think a plain black coat."

"Thanks. Now get out of here," I order, grasping the axe on my back.

Adrenaline courses through me. A sense of familiarity, of strength, of knowing what to do after all this time seemingly stuck in place. My body moves on instincts alone. Speeding around the corner, I discover a crowd hovering around an alleyway. Someone shouts from a shop nearby that an ambulance is already on the way.

"Make way!" I shout, pushing through the crowd that parts for me upon realizing what I am.

Faithful pray and wish me luck as I lean over the body sprawled out in the back of the alley. There's no light here. A young man around my age lays motionless. His eyes grow dim. Blood stains his neck where his veins bulge out of his skin. He's barely breathing. Someone else may have seen and spooked the vampire off from feeding on both her prey. She's bold or mad to have done this so openly.

I press my fingers against his blood. Rubbing the warm substance between my fingers, I imagine myself chasing after this scent like wolves on a fresh kill. My senses amplify. Sounds, scents, and colors threaten to drown me. Then I see the vampire as if she were in front of me; a woman with black

hair and red eyes in a black coat hurrying through a crowded street two blocks away.

"Paladin of the Holy Church," someone whispers, approaching me. She wrings her hands together fearfully. "You will find the vampire who did this, won't you?"

"Of course. Keep watch over him until the ambulance arrives," I order, then hurry around the corner.

Lore waits, leaning against one of the buildings. He presses a hand to my chest when I try to pass him. Huffing, I smack the hand away, then guffaw when he has the audacity to ask, "Shouldn't we let the officers handle this?"

"Shouldn't you let them handle Ayden's case?" I argue, impressed with myself for managing to silence Lore. "I don't have time for this. She's amped up on his blood and she'll crave more, if she wasn't already in a bloodlust prior to the attack. I'm not waiting for her to get away when I'm here to stop monsters like her."

Lore holds up his hands in surrender. "Be on your way then, Paladin of the Holy Church."

I do exactly that, pushing Lore out of the way to find my target. She's three blocks away thanks to his interruption. Crowds move through the streets, oblivious to the monster among them. Creating a lasso of golden light in my grasp, I latch onto a nearby chimney and leap over the crowds. The cool evening air bites at my cheeks. The wind whistles through my hair. Blood rushes through my veins. The confusion of Lore and the mission fades to something simple, to something I've always known. There's a monster and I have to get rid of it. That's what I'm best at. It has been what I've done for almost a decade now, what I've trained to do for even longer. I've walked this path a thousand times.

The vampire glides through the crowded town square nonchalantly, like she hadn't nearly killed a man. I can't risk her catching me when she's in the crowd. There's no telling what she'll do to those nearby in a desperate

attempt to flee. I conceal myself among the rooftops, observing from a distance.

The sun sets. Crowds thin. I've followed her to a quiet side of town where small homes sit nestled together. If I attack, she could damage the homes and harm those inside. I need to get her somewhere in the open, a park or an abandoned home. But then a woman and her daughter come around the corner. The vampire approaches them, her eyes wild. When the vampire grabs the child. She bares her fangs, making them both scream. I'm left with no other options than to make my move.

The vampire spins in time to evade my lasso wrapping around her neck. Snarling, she digs her nails into the child's abdomen. Grinning madly, she throws the girl at me and runs. I catch the child. Her blood stains my robes. She coughs, gagging on her own blood.

That vile beast hurt her on purpose knowing I'd value the girl's life more than catching her. But she's a fool to think so little of the Holy Church.

I swing my axe that casts a long sickle of golden light. The vampire's shrill scream echoes through the night when the sickle cuts clean through her thighs. She drops to the sidewalk, howling.

"P-Paladin, my daughter, m-my baby!" The mother cries, clutching at my robes and her girl.

"It'll be alright. I can stop the bleeding, but you need a priest to heal this wound," I explain calmly.

Resting the girl on the sidewalk, I cast what I can. My focus has always been on offensive and defensive attacks. That's why we always had a Priest or Holy Knight skilled in healing divinity during our missions. Hopefully this will be enough.

"What happened? Is everything--Holy Mothers!" A man shouts from his doorstep nearby.

"Call an ambulance!" I order. Nodding, he hurries inside.

I rise to approach the vampire clawing pathetically at the sidewalk. Her low growls become loud when my footsteps grow near. She throws something at me. The gelatin-like liquid lands on a lamppost that melts on impact; acid.

She throws another and another, but the blood loss is too great. Heaving, she lays on her back, glaring at me the same way every other has. Her lips twist into an animalistic snarl, one I've seen play over and over again in my nightmares.

"What's a Paladin doing in Silra? I thought you lot didn't work well with Lord Seymour," she hisses.

"That's no concern of yours." I point my axe at her throat. She laughs. Most do. Or they beg, throwing one apology after the other, promising to never hurt a soul again even while covered in the blood of those they killed.

"Just like this wasn't a concern of yours!" She howls, attempting to throw more acid at me. It doesn't make it out of her fist.

"Any assault upon humans is my concern."

"Humans?" She giggles, blood gurlges in the back of her throat. She spits blood at me, glaring fiercely. "You're sheep that have forgotten your place. The wolves have returned to hunt and we'll retake our place, one way or the other."

"Are those your final words?"

"Fuc--"

I slice her head clean off. She drops dead.

Grabbing my pendant, I press it to my forehead and whisper a prayer, "May you find peace in the Holy Mother's light."

A sense of relief washes over me. Another monster gone from the world. This is what I'm meant to be doing, not stumbling around Lore's every move. What am I doing here? I should be out in the field.

Light from the street lamp glints off something in her jacket. I lean over to inspect the pin; a horizontal, red crescent moon impaled by a golden sword. The symbol of the Red Moon group. I place the pin into my pocket.

The ambulance and officers arrive moments later. I ride with the girl and her mother to the hospital where we're told some time later that she'll be alright. Unfortunately, the man attacked earlier didn't survive. More instances I'll have to make note of when I contact the church. They'll want to hear about this attack, especially when it's much more rare to happen in Silra.

"I'm glad you're here," an officer says outside the hospital. I recognize him from the precinct, though I'm unsure about his name.

He tips his hat like he's trying to hide when he says, "I've heard there have been more and more vampire attacks all over the place. I didn't think Silra would be hit, but you don't suppose anything's about to happen, do you?"

I don't know. We never do. Vampires often stay in Vexsis where they belong. Those on Earth either have ties to humans or illegal activities. Just like humans become addicted to blight. Vampires become addicted to nectar, what they call human blood. The taste is different than anything else, so they claim. Once they get a taste, a lot like blight, that's all they crave. They'd sooner starve than give it up. We've seen it before--vampires waste away to skeletal remains rather than drink anything else. There's no telling when their own king may finally call for an all out war, if only to procure our blood.

I won't tell him that. It's not something others like to hear.

"Don't worry," I say while patting his shoulder. "The Holy Church always keeps an eye on these incidents. If something's happening, they will discover the truth."

The officer smiles and offers to drive me back to Seymour Manor. I accept the offer gratefully.

It isn't until I'm standing before the double doors that I realize; I'm covered in blood. The children should be asleep, but I don't want to risk running into them. They'll be terrified. I go around back to sneak my way in through my bedroom window.

"Holy--fuck!" I fall onto the floor, hard, after spotting a lone dark figure sitting in my room.

"Welcome back," Lore says from where he's seated in one of the chairs by the fireplace. He closes the book he was reading and sets it on the table. He scowls. "You look like bloody shit."

"Thanks, I had no idea."

"Have fun slaughtering a nasty vamp?"

"Don't get snarky with me. She killed a man and nearly killed a child. Most of the blood belongs to that child, by the way. Even you should understand she had to be stopped." I stomp towards my closet to grab sleeping attire. I hear Lore following me. "I handled the situation."

"Congratulations on your grand achievement."

"If you're here to badger me--"

"I'm not." Lore interrupts. I turn around to find him standing close. He looks me over once more, surprising me further by wiping blood from my cheek. "Did she say why she did it?"

"Because humans are sheep who have forgotten their place." I push his hand away. His touch makes my stomach churn, and not in the disgusted sense.

"How unoriginal. She at least should have gone out with more flare."

I roll my eyes, then recover the pin. "She was carrying this."

"The Red Moon group," he says. "I doubt one of them would be so sloppy. She was likely a fanatic."

"A fanatic in your town that had a sudden vampire attack when there are rumors of more happening lately. Have you heard of those rumors too?" I watch him skeptically, but Lore never gives much away through his expressions.

"They're only rumors," he claims. "This is the first attack we've had in almost a month, which, as you know, is very rare in cities."

I get the feeling he's lying, but I'm not up to debate. Putting the pin on my bedside table, I gesture to the bathroom and ask, "Are you going to leave any time soon? I'd like to clean up and get some rest."

Surprisingly, Lore doesn't give me trouble. He wishes me goodnight, informs me that he did not give the children their candy, then takes his leave. After taking a long shower, I grab my bloody clothes to toss into the fire. I'll make a request for new ones because there's no way I'm risking the children seeing them. They'd be terrified and I wouldn't know what to say if they asked.

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So we've seen Seren in his natural habitat; chasing vampires. Were you surprised by what the vampire had to say? Or how Seren killed her so swiftly? Do you think this will cause more discomfort between Seren and Lore? Was she a member of the Red Moon group or just a fanatic?

17. History Lessons

If someone came to wake me for breakfast, I don't remember. After all the chaos yesterday, I slept in late. However, someone left me a plate of bread rolls and cold bacon on the dining room table that I eagerly munch on alone. Since I'm unclear if Lore went into town without me, I head to his office to check.

Knocking on his door, I'm somewhat surprised to hear him say, "Come in."

When I step in, he chuckles, "That bed head tells me someone had a good night's rest."

I pathetically attempt to tame my hair, although I shouldn't care how he sees me. It's not like I want him to think I look good or anything.

"Did you have good dreams about slaying more vampires?" Lore teases further, setting aside his pen to watch me.

"No, I had a dream about slaying one dhampir in particular," I reply, then get straight to business, otherwise he'll tease me all day. "Has Draven returned with information on any of the suspects?"

"No."

I'd ask him to elaborate, but Lore answers what he wants when he wants then diverges all questions to the shit pile otherwise. I will admit, it's a skill. One I doubt I'll ever possess. And, frankly, I am not in the mood to end up knee deep in shit so I'm not going to attempt asking a damn thing. Besides, he keeps staring at me in a way that makes my spine curl. Like he can't look away or doesn't want to.

"The candy you purchased for the children is in the kitchen. The children are likely at the schoolhouse. Tell them to come to the foyer once you're done," Lore announces.

I don't like that tone.

"Why do they need to come to the foyer?" I ask, skeptically.

Lore maintains an innocent facade. "You'll see when you come with them."

"...you didn't give them your gifts last night, did you?"

Lore leers.

"One of these days my specific dhampir slaying dream is going to become a reality," I growl, pointing at him accusingly. He laughs off my threat and laughs louder when I slam the door shut.

That sly dog! I knew he got gifts for all the kids to make me look bad.

Okay, I admit, I'm *somewhat* flattered. Purely because I tell myself that he sees me as a *little bit* of a threat. Like the size of a fly, kind of threat, but flies can carry all kinds of diseases and wreak havoc so he better not underestimate me!

I can't believe I'm comparing myself to a fly. Have I hit rock bottom already?

After retrieving the candy from the kitchen, I drag myself towards the schoolhouse. Maybe I'll get lucky and the kids will appreciate the candy enough not to run at the sight of me.

Arline's voice carries from one of the classrooms at the end of the hall. It isn't until I'm a few steps away that I realize what she's saying to the children; "1000 years ago, mages meddled with magic they didn't understand in a greedy attempt to discover everlasting life. Do you remember what happened from their meddling?"

I ease my way closer in an attempt to peek through the open door. I don't see anyone, but there's basic math on the chalkboard. Likely from an earlier lesson. They must be sitting deeper in the room.

"The Gateway appeared!" Angel proclaims.

"That's right. A tear in the sky that led to another world, Vexsis, where vampires come from. Who remembers what happened next?" Arline asks.

I rest my back against the wall outside of the room. I'm curious to hear what she has to say, even if I'm fairly certain I know. Lore would never teach proper history when it favors the church.

Nalo tentatively answers, "The Vampire Wars?"

"That did eventually happen, but originally vampires and mortals got along. Vampires had advanced technology while mortals had magic. In the beginning, the races shared their knowledge. Vampires are the reason Earth has things like airships and automobiles by offering a resource that can't be produced on Earth; nellore. Mages worked to restore Vexsis after a terrible civil war and helped in projects that would have taken the vampires much longer to complete."

They used us, is a far better description. We were a means to an end until they learned we could provide something they never expected.

"But what happened?" Oliver practically whispers.

"Those same mages looking for eternal life came up with a horrible plan; to experiment on vampires. Maybe something in their bodies would reveal the path to eternal life. There were more mages who refused to treat their new friends like test subjects though, so the idea was made illegal and very wrong to even speak of. However, in the end, greed won. The mortal king at the time, Graigan Ruthwell, secretly gave money to a few bad mages to kidnap vampires and perform experiments. Of course, they were eventually caught."

"Then the Vampire Wars happened?" Ashby inquires.

"Yes, because the ruler of Vexsis, Morren Valyork, did not accept an apology. He wanted blood. A life for a life, regardless of what that meant for everyone, so Graigan Ruthwell was killed alongside his mages. That was the first time vampires ever tasted human blood and found it to be not only unusually sweet, but also made them stronger."

"So the vampires became greedy too," Angel says.

"That's right. Vampires wanted mortal blood. Mortals wanted eternal life. They went to war. Mortals became upset with their royals for beginning the war and that's how the Holy Church rose to power. They blamed everything on the nobility while promising false salvation from the Holy Mothers."

False salvation .

My teeth grind behind my lips and fingers threaten to rip the bag of candy trembling in my grasp. Of course she'd call it false. A dhampir is still linked to the dark God of Vexsis, Elminore. His influence is engraved in her very being. She can't resist his deceit. He created his children of darkness to spread throughout the lands. No matter how much they reach for the light, it'll never be in their grasp.

"The Holy Church spread lie after lie, claiming that vampires were a test of mortal faith. They were sent by the made up Elminore, the God of Chaos," Arline continues. "When mortals accepted vampires with open arms, they were punished. To earn the love of the Holy Mothers once more, mortals had to push the vampires back to their dark realm. The Holy Church was able to do that thanks to their seraphics, paladins, and champions, but most of all, the first Prophet; Ebony Hawinan. She is the strongest mage to have ever lived and could wipe out hundreds of vampire war machines entirely on her own. Since the mortal people saw the Holy Church saving them more than the noble guards, they began turning on the king, which is why the Holy Church is so strong today. They saw an opportunity and took it, successfully brainwashing an entire kingdom."

My hands rip through the bag without meaning to. I jump in surprise and desperately try to cover the hole to prevent any run away candy.

"But they didn't push all the vampires back. There's lots of us on Earth," Nalo says.

"Of course. Our existence benefits the church, we--" Arline stops when she hears the quiet thud of a candy on the floor, one that slipped through my

fingers. I swiftly grab the candy and head for the door. Better to make it look like I just got here than the fact that I was listening.

"Excuse me?" I call while knocking on the door. Arline's a few steps away, having almost made it to me first.

She scowls when I hold up the bag of candy I brought. The kids' eyes widen, although I realize that only Oliver, Ashby, Angel, and Nalo are here. The others must be studying on their own or given some type of free time since they're old enough to watch themselves.

"I grabbed this for the kids while we were in town yesterday," I explain while sitting the bag on a desk. Oliver and Nalo rush over first, but Ashby clings to Angel's wrist a few steps away. I smile at them. "There's enough for everyone to pass around. We have to save some for the others though, okay?"

Nalo eagerly nods, having already stashed a few pieces in his mouth while Oliver struggles to open the wrapper. I open it for him, then do the same for Ashby and Angel when their candy cravings get the better of them.

I sense Arline's harsh gaze. Sure enough, when I look at her, she's glaring.

"His Grace said to meet him in the foyer when you're done," I add, turning my attention back to the children. They smile brightly at the mention of him.

Arline's jaw moves side to side, then she speaks to the children, "Alright, take the candy to the others and tell them to come here."

The children do as instructed, giggling their way down the hall to get their siblings. Arline, however, stays behind with me.

"Don't you have something to say?" she asks.

"About what?"

"My history lesson. You were listening, weren't you?"

Damn. I hoped she'd buy the lie or at least pretend to.

"I was," I admit while facing her. "You teach what I expected. Lies and disrespect."

Arline snorts. She crosses her arms and looks me dead in the eye, which is enough to tell me that I'm about to receive a lecture or maybe she's on the verge of clawing my eyes out.

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We've gotten ourselves a little history lesson from Arline. What do you think about the history between mortals and vampires? How will Arline react to Seren; can she actually refrain from harming him?

18. Wall of Plaques

"Lies and disrespect," she repeats coldly. "The only lies and disrespect come from your very own church, the establishment built upon countless corpses."

"As if vampires do not have an egregious body count of their own," I rebute, which doesn't affect Arline in the least.

"I never said they didn't," she says matter-of-factly. "What I will say is this; anyone who picks a side and refuses to see its faults is wrong. The vampires are flawed, as is the Holy Church, the mortal nobility, and the stupid terrorist groups claiming to overthrow them. And those like us--" she holds out her arms. "We're caught in the crossfire of their political games, but what's the point in speaking to you about this?"

Arline sighs and goes to walk past me, but she stops to whisper in my ear, "If I find you spewing your church garbage to the children, I'll hang you from the trees by your guts."

"Duly noted," I growl. And this is why I didn't want to walk around the manor without my axe. Still, I've been taught how to fight through broken bones with nothing but my battered fists. I'll manage, if I have to.

Arline steps out of the room in time to greet the children. As expected, I and my lackluster candy are completely forgotten. They're all eager to see Lore. The younger ones grab Arline's hands to drag her towards the foyer while the remainder of the children tag along behind. At least they're munching on the candy. A part of me began to suspect they may throw it away under the belief that it was poisoned. I guess this counts as a very meager win.

Since there's no one else around, and I refuse to face Lore's teasing gaze as the children open their gifts, I take this opportunity to further investigate the schoolhouse.

Resting on one knee, I press my hand to the floor and ease my breaths in tune to the wind I hear whistling through an open window. I hum to an old song that I think my mother sang to me as a child. I've never been able to remember the song in its entirety. But I recall the feeling that this song is meant to be cherished. Memories of her, of home, are tarnished. When I think of them, I remember beasts ripping away all I ever knew, so I don't often think of them, which makes me forget. I wish it didn't. I wish I was brave enough to face the past.

My humming reverberates against the walls and through the halls in search of any echoes, a hidden chamber beneath the school or an unknown attic, but there's nothing. If Lore's hiding something, it isn't in here.

Still, my earnest curiosity urges me to search the rooms one by one. One room in particular catches my attention; the art room, which resides at the back of the schoolhouse in one of the larger rooms. Paint cans, brushes, art easels, and more flood the wide area. A few painted plaques hang on the back wall. When I read over them, I realize they're all names. The plaques in the middle of the wall have recognizable names; the children's. When I look further back, I find Cyan, Arline, and even Draven closer to the top of the wall.

"Are these all the children who have lived here?" I whisper.

"Snooping around, are we?" Draven calls.

I pivot on my heel to find him stepping through the doorway. His orange eyes drift to a plaque, likely his own, then returns to glaring at me. He must have recently returned or Lore lied about him returning, although I can't fathom why.

"That one is yours, isn't it?" I ask, pointing at the plaque. "What exactly did you draw? I can't discern whether they're cats, rabbits, dogs, or a derformed combination of the three."

"Lunch is being prepared. I suggest you change and clean yourself up so you'll be ready in time to eat," Draven says, likely unaware that I recently ate a late breakfast.

Regardless of his avoidance, I attempt another question, "I'm honestly asking, is that plaque yours? Did you grow up here too?"

His earlier look tells me that it is his, but I rather hear it from his own mouth. The more I learn about those around Lore, the easier it'll be to learn about the lord himself. Especially Draven, who follows Lore more than any other. If anyone knows a secret or may be aiding him, it's Draven.

"That plaque is mine," Draven responds, surprisingly enough. "I came to live at Seymour Manor when I was about 13 years old."

I'm tempted to ask what happened, but the more personal the question is, the more likely Draven is to avoid answering.

"And you never left?" I inquire.

"I attended college and traveled." Although he didn't say it, I feel like he wanted to add, *"but my home is here."*

"Then those two are actually Arline and Cyan's?" I gesture to the other two plaques.

Draven nods, but doesn't say more. He reminds me about lunch, then walks away.

Guess that means he has reached his emotional limit for the day. It's shocking he gave in that much without combusting on the spot. He always acts like I'm physically extracting information from him through vigorous torture. What an oddly silent drama queen.

I snoop around the schoolhouse a bit more before heading back to my room. Luckily, I missed Lore's grand display of spoiling the kids. It's nice to have a little break, to sit in my room by the fire relaxing. When was the last time I relaxed? When I sat down to rest my body and mind, staring at the flames that ease every ounce of tension from my muscles... I can't remember.

When the maids call everyone to lunch, I almost grab my axe on the way out on pure instinct. My hand hesitates to release the handle. My arms

shake and breathing becomes labored. Memories of red fields, bloody claws, and the vampire yesterday holding that little girl prevent me from stepping away because I fear what I'll become without my weapon. I count backwards from twenty, easing my breaths until I finally let go.

Downstairs, I hear the children already bickering in the dining hall. The table's being set when I enter. The children don't pay me any mind. Lore, however, rises from where he was knelt by Ashby's side. He struts across the room to stand in front of me donning a far too confident grin. Probably far too pleased with himself at having made the children forget my gift so easily. Why do I feel like we're fighting over their attention?

"How did it go giving the children their candy?" Lore asks, which feels like he's implying that it was so boring they didn't even tell him about it.

"Good. They seemed to enjoy it," I reply, then raise a brow when Lore holds out his hand. I check my back to make sure I didn't actually grab my axe, but there's nothing there.

"What?" I ask.

"Don't I get a piece?" he asks seriously.

"While I would argue you have the mentality of a child, you certainly are not one."

"But the candy was meant as a peace offering. I do believe I deserve a piece." He waves his hand in front of me like that'll make candy appear.

He can't be serious...?

He won't leave and continues staring at me expectantly. Grumbling, I search my pockets. This is a different set of robes though, even if I accidentally stashed a piece--my fingers fumble across a mint. I pull it out and remember the sweet old lady at the airship station who gave this to me for helping with her bags.

"That's not what I was expecting, but I'll take it," Lore says, reaching to snatch the mint from me.

He isn't winning this time.

I rip open the mint and shove it in my mouth, smiling triumphantly at the gaping lord.

He snaps his teeth shut, purses his lips, then steps eerily close. I stand my ground to meet his firm gaze. Whatever foolish expression I'm making must be obvious when he whispers, "You're lucky the children are here or I would have gotten a taste."

I hate that my mind conjures up far too many scenarios of what that would entail.

Then Lore walks away.

I swallow hard. And almost choke on the mint.

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Hello, hello friends! You may have noticed there are two Behind the Scenes locked episodes. These are not story parts. They're extra content discussing things about a chapter, this chapter in particular! There will be more in the future; a mix of cut scenes and notes about what I might have changed or my thought process while writing. Wattpad is working to see if readers are interested in that kind of content or not so, don't worry, the story itself remains free! But if you're interested in little behind the scenes action, you can purchase the author's notes ^_^

Seren seems to have a very hard time calming down and separating himself from the battlefield. What do you think about that? And, of course, how about that bit at the end? ;D How *would* Lore have gotten a taste of that mint if the kids weren't around? Tehehehehe!

Behind the Scenes: Magic System

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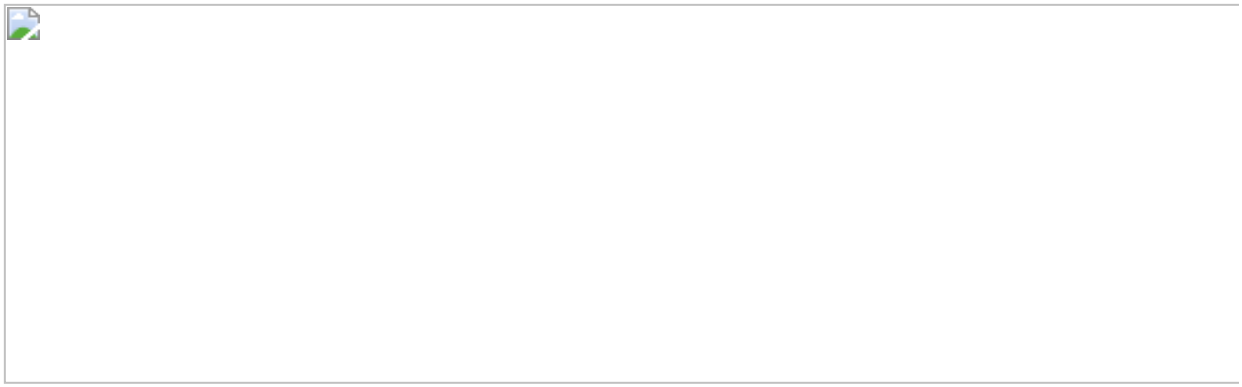

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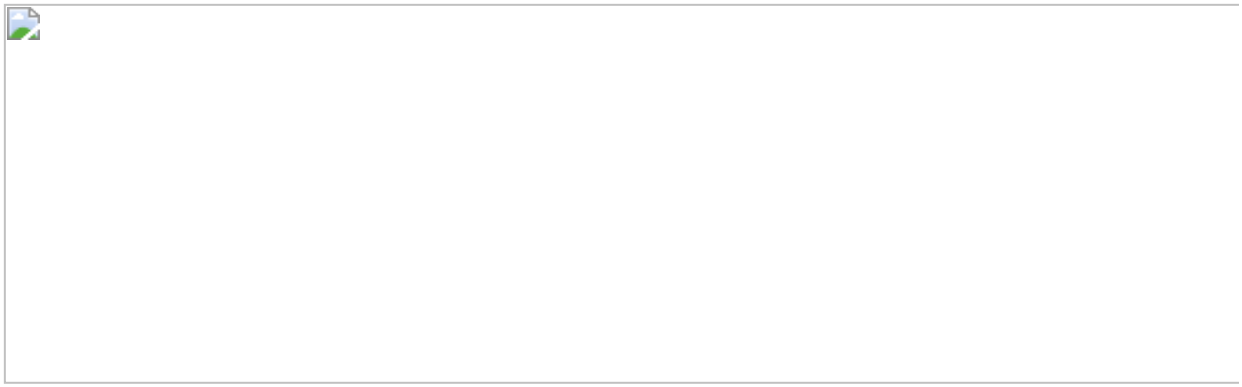

19. A Pitiful Soul

Exercising after lunch is an absolute necessity seeing as my mind can't stop replaying what happened the last two days concerning the forbidden word starting with S and a mint. My heart races recalling how close Lore got.

"Damn it all!" I run faster around the manor, praying my burning thighs will hurt so bad I don't have time to think.

I exercise so long that it's almost dark. It doesn't help either that, while exercising, I feel someone's eyes on me. Through the dark, I peer at the manor where I spot a light within a window. Lore stands within said window, looking out at me. One devilish smirk, then he's gone. He doesn't take the heat of his stare with him.

I do a few extra laps around the manor in a desperate attempt to calm myself. Every time I pass the cathedral, I wish to see what lies within more and more until, finally, I give in.

The door swings open with a gentle push. I shouldn't be surprised not to recognize the interior, but my feet still plant themselves firmly in shock. Within the cathedral rests multitudes of differing equipment with spinning gears, long pipes, and blinking buttons. This is what I imagine a mad scientist's lair to be. Said mad scientist sits cross legged on a table located where the altar should be. The machinery clicking loudly around him covers my quiet steps until I hit one of the stairs that creaks.

"There is no way it's late enough for you to come dra--" Cyan goes deathly silent when he finds me rather than Draven, who he likely expected. He does seem to be the one to drag Cyan away from his crazed experiments.

"You," Cyan snarls.

Before I can speak, he raises his hand in a very telling manner. I hear the verse that threatens heat and dive out of the way when a ball of gold tinted

fire crashes where I once stood. And here I thought Draven would be the first to attack me!

"Get out of here!" Cyan bellows, hurling heaps of gold flames that threaten to blow this cathedral up a second time in only a few days.

"I just want to talk!" I shout, hopping out of the way of another fireball only to nearly have my eyebrows singed off by a second. Rather than run, I face Cyan, raising my arms to form a shield that the fire beats against in long blasts.

"I have nothing to say to you lickspittle!"

...what's a lickspittle?

"Get out of here before I burn you to a crisp!" Cyan bellows.

"You're going to burn yourself too!"

"I've done so on many occasions and turned out fine."

"That's highly debatable."

"What did you say?!" Cyan's fire stops only for his fist to meet my shield. A horrible mistake.

Cyan curses when my shield slithers around his arms like snakes. He struggles to rip free, but the golden light circles his entire form until only his head remains. Those emerald eyes of his take on a fiery tint aimed at me while he growls, "You can't hold this forever. Once I'm out, I'm going to remove limb after limb, starting with your likely favorite, no matter how microscopic it may be. I've got the equipment to find it."

My legs close on instinct. Cyan smirks like a vampire. I'm too frightened by the notion of his threat to even consider what he implied.

"Listen, I'm not here to force you back to the church," I explain, though his exaggerated expression of disgust states he doesn't believe me. "I merely want to talk, to ask what His Grace did to make you leave."

Cyan throws his head back to produce a pretty impressive maniacal laugh. Then he faces me, nose curled and lips twisted into a grimace.

"Is that what they tell everyone? The wicked Lord Seymour convinced a poor, unfortunate seraphic to leave the church?" Cyan mocks, then rolls his eyes so heavily that his head rolls with them. "What a bunch of pompous, putrid, insignificant pieces of dung."

"Listen here, you pathetic loaf." Cyan hops towards me, which would be amusing if I weren't fixated on our conversation. He leans on his tiptoes and spits, "His Grace didn't *make* me leave. He *gave* me the opportunity to escape."

"Escape?" I echo, releasing Cyan without meaning to. It's alright though since all he does is stretch his arms and legs rather than throw another fireball in my face.

"That's right," he states and proceeds to shoot a few sprays of water at the fires in the room. I somehow hadn't noticed them.

"I wanted to leave, but never had the opportunity to do so until Lord Seymour arrived. And you--" he points accusingly at me. "Be honest, haven't you ever considered leaving too?"

I'm meant to say no with vigor and faith, but the word lodges in my throat for the first time in my life. I've always been loyal to the church, always capable of standing against those against me. For some reason, Cyan makes me hesitate. Maybe it's his eyes, the ones that desperately try to show strength, but I see the same terror that overtook mine so many times before.

The day I was indoctrinated as an official seraphic of the church when Priest Aja led us away from our rooms to a cold chamber. The day Paladin Nallin made me face against a vampire who killed two trainee's before me with little more than my battered fists and desperation. The fear coursing through my veins that told me to scream, cry, and run, but I couldn't during either time because... because I was trapped. Strapped to a table or stuck in an arena surrounded by my peers waiting for me to prove myself. And I wanted to do that. I craved the praise and admiration of my family, so I did

what I had to, pushed through the fear and the pain to hear their cheers, to feel Olere's hand ruffling my hair, and hear him say, *"I'm proud of you."*

As frightening as those beginning days were, they served a purpose. Tough times made me who I am today; a man capable of standing against the darkness. It all served a greater purpose, a greater good, and I'm lucky to be a part of it.

"No, I've never considered leaving," I reply, even if I taste the lie on the back of my tongue.

Cyan lowers his hand. His eyes glaze over, then he laughs. Not like earlier where he sounded a bit mad. Something more pitiful that rings in my ears, piercing my mind and grabbing those thoughts that linger like a slight fog.

"You're a fool," he says, the sound of pity etched into more than his voice. His expression speaks a thousand words. "Get out of here, you pitiful freak. If I catch you in here again, you won't leave in one piece."

I've been successfully threatened by two members of Lore's household. I expected Draven to be the first, but I guess he has a better hold of himself than Cyan and Arline. Rather than face Cyan's wrath, or die in a fire since he doesn't seem to mind burning the cathedral and everyone in it to the ground, I walk away. The doors close quietly behind me while my thoughts overtake me.

Cyan claimed he wanted to leave on his own, that Lore didn't trick him. That could be the case. Cyan has a pretty passionate hatred towards the church, but the question remains; why did he *need* an opportunity to leave? If he hated the church so much, he could have asked to go home. Why did he need Lore's help?

And why can't I stop remembering the past?

My hands shake and my stomach churns. I rub at my neck, feeling the faintest scar that frightens me more than any other. I recall the sensation of a cold needle followed by euphoria and memories that I'm not sure are real, but I pray to the Mothers they're a lie.

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Seren finally got to talk to Cyan, but did he truly get the answers he sought? What do you think about Seren's past as more and more is revealed? What do you think the memories could be that he hopes are a lie?

Also, so people are aware, I'm going to try and post more Behind the Scenes author notes on Wednesdays. I don't know if I'll do it every week, but I am going to continue for a bit just to see if people are interested and how it plays out, I guess. Just remember that the story will remain free. The author notes is just extra content ^_^

20. Cyan's Envy

Cyan P.O.V.

"Stupid, idiotic, bootlicking, son of a bitch, asshole!" I bellow. Thanks to that rude and unnecessary visit, my lab wreaks of the stench of smoke. Again. Suppose I could have used a different spell, but he walked up on me! It was the spur of the moment. Now Draven's--

"What happened now?"

Elminore be damned.

I pivot to find Draven walking slowly among the chaos. He dramatically waves his hand to disperse the smoke. He keeps that hand over his mouth and nose so his voice comes out muffled, "Can't you refrain from blowing yourself up for a few days?"

"I didn't blow anything up, you fucking nugget."

Draven raises a brow while mumbling under his breath, "What kind of insult is that?"

I don't know either. When he's around my brain takes a vacation to Shitsville. Don't know why. It can't smell much better there than the lab.

"That walking disappointment snuck into my lab and I might have, um, threw a fireball... or two or three... at him," I mumble and prepare myself for a possible tongue lashing. Or, wait, um, lecturing, I mean.

Draven drops his hand, revealing a glimpse of anger through his tightened fists. He heaves a long breath through his nose, probably regretting it instantly because of the smoke. Then he swiftly approaches me, almost sending me toppling over one of my benches. I grasp the edge to keep myself up right in time for Draven to lean over me and growl, "What did we

say about harming him? He's a member of the church, our enemy that wants any excuse to wipe us off the map. Don't give him a reason to."

"He's fine, in fact, he did more damage to me," I huff while scurrying away from him.

Draven suddenly grasps my arm to spin me back to him. His angered expression causes a few heart palpitations that I'll have to get checked out.

"What do you mean by that? What did he do?" Draven asks. I don't know if I want to believe I hear honest concern in his voice or not.

"Did he hurt you?" Draven's grip tightens. My body shivers in fearful anticipation.

I'm not accustomed to this much contact, even over my plethora of layers and years of trying to get past the incessant need to claw out of my own skin from a mere touch. One graze of a finger or even the bump of a shoulder and it's as if spiders crawled beneath my skin. I itch and itch to no avail. It also doesn't help that Draven's the one touching me. He's always this weird combination of desperation to run and pull him closer. My brain can't process this much information without the threat of spontaneous combustion, which frankly is a risk for me regardless of Draven's proximity.

"Let go," I order far too breathlessly for my liking.

He does so immediately while wearing that apologetic frown.

I itch at the area he just touched. Once, I'd tear through the skin. I'm much better now, although I have moments where the urge is worse.

"I'm fine," I say. "He defended, that's all, and pretty well I might add. Got me caught up in a spell, but he let me go once we started talking."

Draven nods slowly. "What did he say to you?"

"Asked a few questions about why I left the church. He thought I was ensnared by the vicious Lord Seymour," I reply while continuing to clean

up the mess. Draven follows, picking up a few singed papers to stack on a table.

"He has it bad y'know," I glance back at Draven, who tilts his head curiously. I hate it because it makes him look cute. He already has too much power with that handsome face of his. Adding cute to his over-stacked arsenal should be against the rules.

"Hmm?" Draven hums.

"Seren, he's, like, really taken by the church even if they, uh..." I scratch the back of my neck. "I'm saying I feel bad for him, in a way. That could have been me. It *was* almost me."

"Are you saying you want to help him escape too?" Draven asks.

"What? No." I scoff even if Draven's expression states that he sees through my... lie? *Is it a lie?* I don't fucking know. And I ain't in the mood for any self discovery, deep thought shit, so I shrug it off. "I don't owe him shit, especially when I know every word we say to him is being sent back to the church to be picked through with a fine-tooth comb. So who cares? He'll be gone soon anyway and his life isn't our problem. Let him waste away at the church. I don't care."

Draven nods. He walks over to a sink to fill a bucket and get some rags. I kind of wish he'd leave the mess to me because a.) we wouldn't be alone b.) I can finally stop thinking about *The Unspeakable Incident* c.) why does he make cleaning look hot and d.) he can stop making himself seem like the perfect butler who can do no wrong. It's irritating and it irritates me that it irritates me. Have I said irritated enough?

Draven reaches me and sets a rag on the table, allowing me to grab it.

"Where were you?" I ask, scrubbing some of the ash away.

Draven's doing the same when he replies, "Beg your pardon?"

I snort. "The other day, you disappeared for a bit. Where did you go?"

"I was out on business for His Grace."

"What kind of business? Did it have something to do with the case he and Seren are working on?"

"Yes."

"You're lying," I state, to which he raises his gaze, challenging me with his eyes to explain. "You left the night Seren arrived too and that had nothing to do with the case. What else are you up to? Can't I help?"

"It's nothing you need to concern yourself with."

My teeth grind.

"Why not?" I hiss and throw the rag into the bucket so it splashes Draven's fancy suit. He sighs, then watches me quietly when I shout, "How come every piece of His Grace's business is something I *need to concern myself with* ? Am I that untrustworthy?"

"You know that is not the reason and--"

"Then what is it? Why is it always you? Why can't it ever be me?! I can help, whatever His Grace is up to, I can be a part of--"

"Cyan, stop," Draven says, his eyes stern and voice even firmer. He stands tall, placing his hands in front of him like the perfect butler he is. He never strays from his duties and it pisses me off. "We've all done work for His Grace before, on a number of separate occasions. He trusts you to do what you're best at and I do what I'm best at."

"Which is apparently more useful than me. He always goes to you first. You're always up to something while I'm sent on little spy missions for the precinct. I take down purse snatchers and the occasional gang member, nothing more. Most of the time, you're even tagging along and because of that we--" I stop myself, but not in time because the memories resurface. The two of us. A mission gone wrong. An argument. My klutzy nature. The

moment that changed everything. At least for me. Draven doesn't care. It's a bad memory, nothing more.

"I've been by his side much longer than you," Draven speaks calmly, like he's talking to a child who needs coddling. I hate it. "I've been working by his side on cases for many years. The longer you're here, the more work he will give you."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." I wave him off, then reach for my rag. I slap the rag on the table and scrub so hard my fingers painfully tingle. Feeling Draven's gaze on me makes me shiver more. I feel like an idiot for always reacting like this around him. We're either arguing or I'm stumbling over his every word, hoping for some type of reaction that he never gives. And even if he did, what would I do? Nothing. Because I can't.

"I can do this by myself," I say to him when I feel like he's about to speak. "You should go."

If Draven has an argument, he doesn't give it. Nodding, he sets his rag aside and says, "Don't stay up too late. I shouldn't have to drag you to breakfast every morning."

"Then stop dragging me to breakfast. It's not your job and I'm not a child."

Draven gazes quietly at me. Too quietly. The crickets are too damn loud, echoing in my now ringing ears.

"You're right. I'll stop then," he says and walks away.

It isn't until long after the doors shut and I know he's too far away to hear that I throw the water bucket against the wall because, apparently, I am absolutely a child. Specifically, a child in need of some anger management classes.

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Early update because another behind the scenes author's note will post tomorrow, but idk at what time so I rather it come out after this

chapter lol Enjoy the early update!

Cyan and Draven sure are tense though o.o And Cyan always has some weird insult to throw out lol What do you think about their relationship? What kind of jobs do these two go on for Lore?

Behind the Scenes: Cyan Addition

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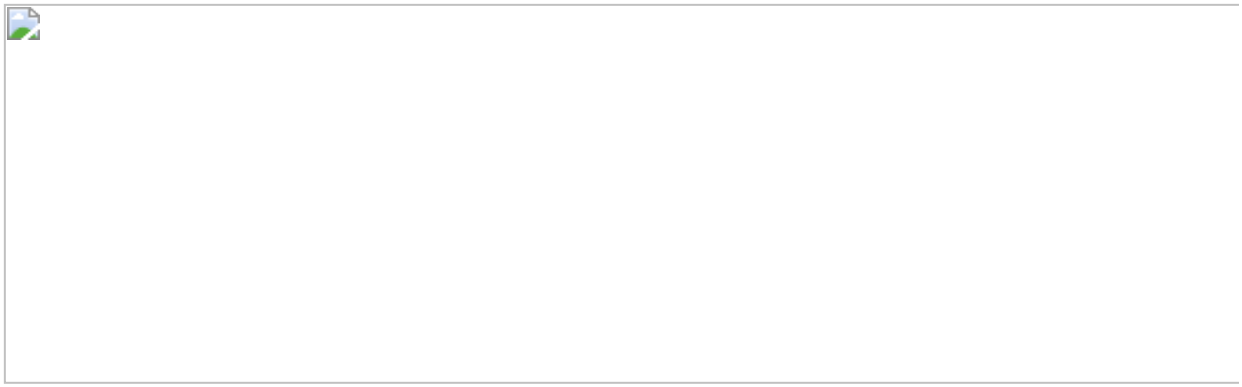

21. Bedtime Story

Seren P.O.V.

After talking to Cyan, I head back into the manor. My muscles ache from the prolonged and unusual exercise so I run a hot bath. The water eases the tension from my aching shoulders. A soft scent of lavender overtakes the room from whatever, likely very expensive, soap this place has. My thoughts stray from dark and terrifying to a quiet hum.

This place is built to rile me up. I have to withstand their attacks that are proving to be even more difficult than physical ones. Maybe this is a reason Olere sent me, hoping I'll learn from the experience. On the battlefield, there was no time for chatting. It was kill or be killed. I didn't learn the artful ways of manipulative mind games. To be honest, it isn't a skill set I wish to have. I had always hoped my skills as a warrior were enough. That being myself was enough, but that has never seemed to be the case. I have be more; more than what I am.

I step out of the tub in time to hear a knock at my bedroom door followed by Lore's voice, "Seren, are you still awake?"

What is he doing here?! Did Cyan tell him that we spoke and he's upset? Or maybe he has come to tease me some more. I'm not in the mood nor am I properly dressed for the occasion!

"Uh, yes, give me a moment!" I call, then curse when I slip on the wet tiles and faceplant. "Ouch..."

Lore's laugh manages to reach the bathroom. "Did you just fall?"

"No!" I scramble to my feet, narrowly avoiding falling a second time. "Hold on, I'm changing!"

"Oh... do you need assistance?"

I grip the sink to steady my shaking legs. "No, be quiet and wait a moment!"

I dry off as quickly as possible. Although Lore isn't here, I hate that he's nearby while I'm naked. Checking myself in the mirror, I find that my lip has a decent sized cut thanks to my tooth ripping into it. I wipe away the blood, then put on my nightclothes to meet Lore at the door.

I forgot that he likes to wear cursed items to bed. That damn robe hangs over his form like every piece was perfectly draped. At least tonight he has tightened it to hide the toned body beneath.

"Do you need something?" I ask while contemplating what is safer; meeting his gaze or risking staring at his exposed collarbone. I've yet to decide because each appears to be equally dangerous.

"You did fall," he says, raising his hand to gently grasp my chin.

I'm too shocked to respond when he nudges my head to the side to get a better look at my busted lip. His thumb barely grazes over the tender skin. I blame the tingling sensation on the pain.

"I got this earlier... while exercising," I lie and push his hand away. His tilted head states he wouldn't believe me even if I provided photographic proof. Huffing, I cross my arms and repeat the question, "Do you *need* something?"

"I just finished reading the children a bedtime story and thought I'd offer to do the same for you," he replies so nonchalantly that I'm jealous. I wish I could brush off what he said as easily as he says it. Instead, every word and move leaves me on my toes and they are really starting to ache.

"I'm going to bed. Goodnight," I grunt and nearly slam the door in his face. He grasps said door, pushing it open so he can walk in.

He uses different soap than mine. He smells like freshly picked apples. Why apples? I love apples. Why couldn't he have picked orange or banana? Although I like both of those too...

"Officer Jaryl called earlier," Lore says, taking a seat in one of the chairs. He gestures to the other. I take my seat and listen intently. "The woman Ayden sent money to, Sulli Harolds, is an illegitimate child to Ayden's father."

"But didn't Jaryl speak to the family and they all said they didn't know her?" I ask.

Lore nods. "Yes. According to Sulli, that is what she expected. They disowned her when she got pregnant at 14 to the son of an aristocratic family, who obviously didn't take responsibility. The only one who cared about her at all was Ayden. She said he has been sending her money so she could afford to go to school and take care of her child. She's meant to graduate college this year and, luckily, already has a job set up."

So Ayden was trying to ensure that his sister had a chance at a better life. He doesn't sound like the drug dealing type. They aren't exactly compassionate. Their jobs are essentially to abuse and kill people.

"Ayden was likely taking orders from someone, don't you think?" I inquire.

"That was my thought as well," Lore replies. He muddles my brain by tossing one leg over the other, giving me the briefest glimpse of way too much thigh or not enough depending on who you're asking and whether they're in their right mind.

Good thing Lore's still speaking because my mouth's too dry to formulate words. "The more we learn of him, the more I believe he is the type to take orders rather than give them. Considering the money he sent, he could have been coerced into the dealings."

I nod while desperately trying to regain my speech. Lore raises a brow, silently questioning me until I finally manage to say, "Right, someone could have discovered his situation and offered him money in exchange to work for them. If that is the case, it'd be someone who holds sway over him. Family, maybe?"

Lore taps his fingers against the arm of the chair in thought. "They did lie during a murder investigation to hide Ms. Harolds' existence, however, I don't see why they would offer Ayden money while knowing he was sending it to her. Regardless," Lore rises. "It's late and we should look further into this tomorrow. I merely wanted to let you know Jaryl called."

Nodding, I follow Lore to the door. He doesn't leave immediately, which has me looking around to check if he forgot something.

"My offer still stands," he says, puzzling me. Resting his arm against the doorframe, he leans in to whisper, "Staying here to read you a bedtime story, although if you're not interested in a story, I'm sure we could find other ways to keep ourselves occupied."

Lore grunts when I shove him out the door. There's no way I'm letting him see my face when I feel like I'm about to burst into flames.

"Goodnight, Your Grace," I call, locking the door. If only the lock would keep his snickers at bay.

"Goodnight," he replies and walks away.

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Lore, stop being so sexually frustrating. Seren can't stand it! But if it makes you feel better, Seren, I did make Lore absolutely stunning for a reason. You were doomed from the start. Anywho, what do you think about Lore's constant flirting and Seren's incapability to truly stop himself from constantly checking Lore out? ;D

22. A Midnight Drink

I wake in the night with a pounding headache, likely because I slept on my neck weirdly. Why are the most simple of pains often the worst? Like aches from sleeping the wrong way and paper cuts. Paper cuts are the definition of pain and I've been beaten, stabbed, and tossed off high buildings.

Swinging my feet onto the floor, I hiss at the unexpected cold. I've been here a few days and I've already grown spoiled by the normally very warm floors. The barracks back at Trinia Cathedral were always a tad cold from the old stone halls that simply didn't retain the heat very well. I'd shiver all the way to the kitchens when wishing for a snack or somehow feel warmer outside on the training grounds than in the barracks. Still, I wouldn't change it for the world. Hearing my family nearby sleeping soundly, their laughter echoing in the halls, knowing they're safe, that they're close enough for me to save if they needed it--I slept better with all of them nearby.

Shivering, I throw on a robe and rush my way downstairs, or rather, I try to. Stopping at the top of the stairs, I spot Draven at the front door of the manor. He peers over his shoulder, catching me frozen on the first step. His orange eyes glisten brightly in the dim light of the halls. The moonlight drifting through the open doorway makes his red hair even darker.

"Heading off somewhere?" I ask, descending the steps slowly in preparation for whatever may come. Something tells me I wasn't meant to catch him sneaking out. There's no telling what he may do if this is truly a moment I wasn't meant to see. He may believe it to be easy to be rid of me without witnesses.

"It's rude to snoop," he replies, retreating from the door.

"This may be hard for you to believe, but I wasn't snooping." I stick my thumb out towards the kitchen. "I'm thirsty, so I was getting a drink."

Draven raises a curious brow, which makes me do the same because why is getting a late night drink considered an odd thing to do?

Then he asks, "Why didn't you just get a drink from the bathroom sink attached to your room?"

"I...that..." Well, that's an excellent question. Grumbling, I cross my arms that can't possibly hide my embarrassment. "I've never had an attached bathroom before so excuse me if it wasn't the first thing to come to my tired mind."

Draven appears to believe me because he doesn't question further. I, on the other hand, do; "So, where were you going?"

Judging by how he's fully dressed, he wasn't simply stepping out for some fresh air.

"I have many duties. None of which I need to explain myself for, especially to one like you," he snarls, seeming to be more willing to show his true colors when we're alone in the dark.

"Based on your tone, I'd wager that, if the situation were different, you'd have killed me right here and now," I claim while stepping closer, although I imagine I'm not that intimidating to his overly tall self. Even Lore is a few inches shorter because he's a dhampir while Draven's full blooded. All vampires tower over even the tallest of mortals.

Draven tilts his head, eying me quietly, then smirks. It's downright frightening, like I've looked into my future and saw the reaper.

"Get your drink, Seren," he whispers so sickeningly sweet that it coats the air in tainted sugar.

Pivoting on his heel, Draven walks away in eerie silence, although I'm certain he has much more to say. He simply knows how to contain his thoughts and that makes him a threat, regardless of whether Lore is the killer I'm searching for. There's no telling what is going on in that butler's mind.

While I do retrieve my drink, I also rest my ear against the wall. Imagining all the tiny cracks and crevices, the places to hide among these walls, I hum an incantation that heightens every sound. I hear wind against stone, spiders twisting cobwebs, the kids snoring, and Draven walking the manor. I do the same, heading back to my room with slow, steady steps.

By the time I reach my room, Draven has returned to his room. Whatever he was doing, he has stopped for the evening, or at least is pretending to have stopped. I lay awake all night listening, waiting for him to leave his room, but he never does. Whatever he was up to isn't worth risking again tonight, or it wasn't actually that big of a deal. I hate that either is an option and I'm left being paranoid day and night.

Sunlight creeps in through my window. I hear the creaking of Lore's bed and his low groan as he likely stretches, then I cut the cast. The headache I woke up with has worsened by a hundred thanks to holding that cast for so long. My ears ring, struggling to return to their natural state. I'm tempted to skip breakfast to spare myself, not only from Lore's teasing, but also the kids can get very, very loud. But my stomach is equally loud right now. I easily give in to my stomach's demands because, frankly, food overthrows pain.

Breakfast goes by without much incident, save for the time Draven enters. I expect a glare, but when he sees my face, it makes him grin like he won an award. I don't know why until I spot a brief reflection of myself in one of the pitchers. There are dark bags under my eyes thanks to staying up all night.

Damn it. Lore's going to notice and--

"My, oh my, look at those bags under your eyes. Did you stay up all night dreaming of me? I'm flattered," Lore says the moment we're in the car. He even taps my face just below said eye bags.

"If I dreamt of you, it'd only be a nightmare," I hiss while swatting his hand away.

"A nightmare," he echoes, then leans in. "Nightmares are determined by the individual. A paladin of the church would consider an erotic dream containing a dhampir to be a nightmare."

"What are you implying?"

Lore smirks. "I wonder."

He's--I--I can't stand this rancid dhampir!

Luckily for me, Lore doesn't say more on the ride to the station. He doesn't have to. The damage has been done. I'm practically glued to the door to keep some space between us while he pretends to be a jittery mess. I know it's his way of making our legs or arms touch simply to hear me growl or earn a glare that he pretends not to see.

Once at the station, we step out of the car and head inside. Jaryl greets us around a yawn and six already prepared coffees where he explains four of them are his. If we value our fingers, don't touch.

Understandable. I could do with about eight coffees right now and even that may not be enough to awaken me from this drowsiness.

Lore does the explaining about our thoughts concerning Ayden last night. I'm too busy yawning every few minutes to say anything. My face actually hurts from it.

"If we're leaning towards someone hiring Ayden, I think looking back at the law firm is our best bet," Jaryl says while on his second cup of coffee that's looking more and more appetizing by the second. "There were a few among the list who have blackmailed or coerced others into doing their bidding."

"Not to mention Mr. Bellvitz," I add, struggling to contain another yawn. "He was Ayden's boss."

Lore nods in agreement. "We'll add him to our list of suspects and maybe try to pay him another visit today, if Seren can manage to stay awake."

I wave his concerns off, although that desk is looking mighty comfortable...

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HAPPY PRIDE MONTH EVERYONE!! Will Seren be able to stay awake for this investigation? xD Hmmm, what was Draven up to last night?!

If you're curious about Draven, there will be something posted tomorrow called a Story Branch. This is another new addition, like the locked author notes, to see if readers are interested in this type of material. I'm not sure how often I plan to do this, but I wanted to give both a try! Again, this story branch is not necessary to understand the story. It's just there for fun for those who may be interested. A Story Branch can be canon to the story or made up for the fun of the reader, where the story branches off into the thoughts of another character, a subplot, or maybe a sexy dream, who knows.

In this case; what was Draven thinking when Seren interrupted him trying to leave the estate earlier? How does he feel about our paladin and Cyan? Tune in tomorrow to read it!

23. Have Some Fun

Jaryl and a few officers continue compiling a suspect list while Lore and I decide to check in at Confident Cases again. If the culprit is there, our appearance a second time may rile them up. Although I don't know if I'm very intimidating right now since I really need a nap. Draven waits in the car while Lore and I head up the elevator to the offices.

"Your Grace!" Marieh calls from the front desk that's overcome with more papers than our last visit. Hopefully, for Marieh's sake, Ikehn is searching for a new secretary. "Are you here with an update about Ayden?"

"Unfortunately, no. We're still investigating and would like to have a few words with everyone again with Mr. Bellvitz' permission, of course," Lore responds.

Did he mention Ikehn first on purpose so we can go straight to him? He's one of our prime suspects now that we're considering people who had power over Ayden. Marieh guides us back to Ikehn's office. He's finishing up some paperwork when we take a seat on the couch. He pushes aside the papers moments later, then takes a seat across from us.

"How is the investigation going, Your Grace?" Ikehn asks. He crosses his legs and rests his clasped hands over his knees.

"We're still thoroughly investigating those on the list you were so gracious to give us as well as a few others we've determined on our own. However, we'd like to ask some follow up questions to you and your workers, if you wouldn't mind."

Ikehn may maintain a calm expression, but he repeatedly checks his watch. "Of course, Your Grace, however, I must admit that my staff and I are very busy. Many of our clients aren't the best at waiting either so I will do what I can, but should an issue with my clients arise, I will have to step out for a moment."

"We completely understand and are very appreciative that you're giving your time to us. We'll try our best not to cause any issues," Lore says, then goes into a line of questioning that I don't find particularly important. However, the more Lore speaks, the more I notice Ikehn checking his watch again.

"I'm sorry that I don't have the information you seek," Ikehn says at the end of Lore's questioning. He still offers his hand for Lore to shake. "If you need to speak to me again, please call first to request an appointment."

"We'll make sure to do that." Lore grins, then heads for the door.

"He seemed impatient," I say once we're out of hearing range. "Although, that may actually have to do with us barging in twice without an appointment."

"Perhaps, or he's feeling cornered."

"You're leaning towards it being Ikehn then?"

Lore tilts his head curiously. "Aren't you?"

"Not like we have many others to choose from," I admit solemnly. I never met Ayden, but the more time that passes the more I feel like we've failed him by not catching his killer yet.

Interviewing the rest at Confident Cases proves insignificant. There's one guy who spilled tea all over himself and almost did the same to me, but we couldn't imagine someone that nervous could perform a murder. We're sent back to the precinct where Jaryl provides us with further bad news.

"We inspected Mr. Bellvitz's bank records, but there's nothing pointing to suspicious activity," he claims while handing over said record.

"What about the others on our list? You find anything suspicious?" I ask, earning myself a low sigh from Jaryl.

"A lot of suspicions. Too many to count. Most of these folk are still causing trouble, but I don't know about murder. I've already sent some men to look

into them."

Humming, Lore returns the records to Jaryl.

"Thanks for all your hard work, Officer Jaryl. Let us know if you find anything new or need our assistance," Lore says while rising from his chair. I look frantically between him and Jaryl, confused by his sudden departure, but stumble after him anyway.

"We're just leaving when there's plenty more suspects to question?" I ask, sliding into the car after Lore. Draven hops into the driver's seat and pulls out into the street.

"Jaryl can handle them," Lore claims.

"But it'd be faster if we help."

"We are helping."

"By leaving?"

"Mhm."

He's making no sense. I don't even know what to ask to make him make sense. Lore's a walking conundrum, a puzzle that thinks it's complete although it's missing a dozen pieces. My confusion amplifies when Draven takes a different route than the usual. We're heading further away from the manor and the city. The streets become wider, houses smaller, and yards bigger.

"Where are we going?" I ask, staring curiously at Lore's devious grin.

"Take a guess," he says, sounding like a child playing a new game. "Come on, guess."

"A hospital to get your head checked?"

Lore snorts. "I suppose your feeble little mind wouldn't be able to determine our destination even if it tried."

"My feeb--" my words are cut short by Lore's sudden intrusion of my personal space. The handle of the car presses deeply into my spine in my desperate attempt to escape Lore's enticing gaze. He hovers over me, one hand behind my back against the door and the other resting on the seat to keep him steady. Loose strands of his long hair brush against my face, as does his every word.

"If we cannot find answers in Ikehn's bank account, where else would they be?" he asks like he expects me to be able to answer, but I'm too busy trying to decide where to look. His skin is fair and smooth. Hair softer than silk. Lips... very, very close.

"His... home?" I finally answer, then miraculously manage to glare. "You want to break into his house, don't you?"

"Very good," he whispers, somehow getting closer. "There's nothing more telling than one's home. What he has and what he hides, we'll find it."

"That's illegal, even for you."

"Are you going to stop me, Paladin? Will you send word to the church of my evil deeds or..." Lore practically presses his cheek against mine to whisper, "Are you going to have some fun with me?"

Then he clicks the handle of the door and I fumble out of the car.

"You rat bastard!" I holler, hopping to my feet in a moment of fear because I thought I was going to bust my head open. But apparently, Draven stopped the car in the forest at some point.

"So dramatic, you're fine," Lore teases, snickering while following me out of the vehicle. He dusts me off like some sort of househusband, which he would be terrible at for numerous reasons. Too many to count, actually!

I shove him away.

"If you're going to get in the way, stay here and watch the car," Lore adds. "Or you can come with me and break the law, your choice."

"I'd rather not do either," I grumble, but reluctantly follow after Lore and Draven. Who knows what they'll get up to on their own.

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Hey guys, I'm sorry the Story Branch didn't update yesterday. I'm not really sure what went wrong. I'll try to see when/if Wattpad will launch it and let you know. And over the next few days (maybe even now,) there should be some reactions you can purchase specific to this story. Check those out and see if you like them! :)

Anywho, Lore and Seren's interactions are so fun to write lol Seren's a mess and Lore knows how to be a flirtatious bastard. What do you think about their plans of breaking and entering? Do you think Ikehn behind Ayden's murder?

24. Breaking and Entering

When did Lore even tell Draven to head for Ikehn's? Or are they so in tune with one another that Draven knew without his lord having to say so? That's either impressive, creepy, or both, although I may be biased seeing as Draven in general creeps me out. He's too quiet, so quiet I forget he's there sometimes. That's saying a lot for me.

Speaking of Draven, he sends a glare over his shoulder in my direction. One that says he would have preferred I stay in the car or got run over by a very heavy car. Preferably one that would crush my skull on impact. The child in me comes out and I stick my tongue out at him. He bristles like I insulted his mother, then surprises me by giving me the finger.

So he does have child-like tendencies as well. I don't know how I feel about that. I might have preferred if he continued playing the heartless butler.

If Lore noticed or cared about our behavior, he doesn't show it. The three of us walk silently through the woods for some time. Finally, we come upon a vast iron fence surrounding a manor that is far too elaborate even for Ikehn's salary. Three stories high at the front stretching far and wide, then flowing back a lot like Lore's. Made of drink brick with a vast entryway held up by circular columns and straining gargoyles. Now this would make a great entrance to a villain's lair...

"Draven, keep a watch out here. Let us know if Ikehn returns or there's any sign of someone noticing us," Lore orders.

Nodding, Draven climbs a nearby tree to disappear among the brush. Without a moment of hesitation, Lore hops the fence. I'm left gaping like a fish out of water. By how quick and efficient they are, they've definitely done this before. How often? Does this point to Lore being a serial killer or a far too passionate investigator with a hidden criminal record? I'm not given the chance to come to a conclusion.

"Ouch!" I hiss when something hard hits the back of my head. It was a twig that no doubt came from Draven.

My assumption is proven correct when he hisses, "You'll get us caught if you dawdle. Get going or go back to the car."

"I know, I know, Cranky," I grumble under my breath. I should knock him out of that damn tree, but I miraculously resist the urge.

Grumbling, I hop the fence and hurry to meet Lore in the yard. I'm tempted to ask how Draven will notify us when we're so far away, but it's too risky to speak. There are a few workers lingering about. We keep low to the ground and avoid open areas. Luckily, it's easy to do here. Ikehn loves his landscaping. There's an entire maze of hedges on the left side of the property along with a garden overfilled by statues to the right. I kind of wish he isn't the villain so we remain on good terms and I can ask who his decorator is. Not that I could afford them, but it's a nice thought.

Lore chooses to go right through the garden. A gardener walks by as we crawl behind a fountain. It's strange seeing Lore like this. I didn't think he'd be willing to get his precious clothes dirty. However, the entire time, Lore wears a wicked grin. His eyes shimmer with delight, surveying the area like a bloodhound on the hunt. He's quick on his feet, fading from one shadow to the next like he was born for this. Not to say I'm a loud, bumbling fool behind him, I can handle myself. I haven't exactly been trained to break into someone's house though. It was more of a, *"is there a vampire here? Okay, kick the door in,"* vibe. Lore, however, appears to take pleasure in this. Guess it makes sense that he referred to this as *"having some fun"* earlier. And further confuses me on whether this leans towards him being a serial killer or far too passionate a helper.

After some time searching the area, we come across an unlocked door leading to Ikehn's library. Lore steps inside first, inspecting the room for another. I carefully shut the door behind us and keep my eyes out for anyone coming by. There are a lot of windows here. We could easily be seen.

"Do you have a plan other than sneak in and hope we don't get caught?" I hiss into Lore's ear while we step away from the windows and take a little breather.

"Nope," he replies nonchalantly. "It's more exhilarating this way, don't you agree?"

"No, it isn't."

"Has anyone told you that you're too uptight?"

"Has anyone told you that you're not uptight enough?"

Lore taps his chin, seriously contemplating the question before stating, "No, in fact, I haven't. People tend to find my almost lackadaisical style charming, possibly even downright adorable."

"Those people deserve a good hit to the noggin."

Lore purses his lips. "I gave you the option of staying in the car. Don't complain when you made your decision."

"There wasn't much of a decision to make. If I stayed, who knows what you might have done alone here?"

"Murdered the entire staff and danced in their blood," Lore says while wiggling his fingers in front of his exaggerated crazed eyes.

I rub my throbbing temple. "You're maddening."

"I could be maddening in other ways, if you'd grace me with the opportunity," he whispers while running a slim finger across my shoulders that are now painfully tense.

"I'd sooner grace you with a beheading."

Giggling like a misbehaved child, Lore decides that was the conclusion of our *conversation* and continues onward. He inspects the library, pulling out books and pressing against shelves. While he does that, I try to determine

what to do next. Should we head to Ikehn's office? There may be paperwork or even a safe that contains some questionable income. To do that, we'd have to risk searching this place. It's not like there's a map in the foyer we can check.

Lore must have determined the library was a bust because he's about to head for the door when I hear the quiet click of the doorknob. He curses. I grasp him by the back of his coat and fling us both over the sofa in front of the fireplace. He hits the sofa with a nearly inaudible grunt. I fall on top of him in time for the door to open.

The soft clicks of someone's shoes echoes in the library, growing closer. Lore lays beneath me, utterly silent save for his vibrant eyes that are far too delighted for this scenario. We're about to get caught while he's grinning like he won the lottery. As if he even needs the lottery. We should be concerned about this worker who is about to discover two strange men chest to chest and nose to nose in their boss' living room!

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Look at our boys committing a crime together. Couple goals~ lol Do you think Lore's actions make him more suspicious or is he really just a very passionate investigator? And how about that ending? ;D We all love some close proximity~

25. Searching For Proof

My heart pounds in my chest, itching to break free, which I will claim has to do with the footsteps rather than how close Lore is. Or how his hands rest on my waist to keep me from toppling over. Or how his thigh moves a smidge, forcing our hips to press even closer. I bite my lip to hold back any noise that would dare escape my lips. Lore's smirk falls. His grip tightens. I feel his sharp intake of breath.

Then the footsteps fade. The door shuts.

I sigh in relief, lowering my head until I realize that means resting my forehead against Lore's chest.

"I do believe you have the ability to have knocked her out or even make us disappear. Therefore, I must assume you took this route because you are deprived of physical contact or simply infatuated with me enough to take the risk," Lore teases. His fingers tighten at my waist as if to remind me of the position we're in.

"Your ego could drown a nation," I hiss, meeting his teasing stare with a glare that's totally pointless. "First off, what would we have done if she ran off before I finished the cast? Second, I'm not knocking an innocent woman out because she stumbled in on an idiot who broke in here without a plan."

"What does that make you; the one who followed the so-called idiot?"

"Apparently, the biggest idiot of all. I can't believe I had to be like this with you," I growl while attempting to pull away, but Lore locks an arm around my waist. I grunt when falling back onto his chest hard. The only thing that kept us from kissing were my hands catching myself on his broad and muscular shoulders. Like, wow, they're... they're firm.

"What's wrong with being like this with me?" he whispers. "Based on your heart rate, you're more than happy about some close proximity."

I shove away from Lore before I do something stupid or he does something stupid. I'm learning more and more that he doesn't have the most brilliant track record. Unfortunately, I'm falling down that rabbit hole myself.

"If you honestly think that I--hey," I hiss at Lore, who has already moved from the sofa to the door. He opens said door, peeking into the hallway.

"Lore, wait," I growl, then rush after him while also tiptoeing, which is far more of a hassle than one could ever predict. The two simply do not go together and I haven't had the training because who the hell thought I'd try to run on my tiptoes?

Lore and I move quietly through the hallway, apparently completely forgetting about what transpired. That's fine. I'd rather forget too. We manage to reach the foyer without being noticed, but when I head towards the next hall, Lore goes the opposite way. Once more, I'm hurrying after him and completely clueless of his plans, or rather, lack thereof.

"Where are you going now?" I inquire, slipping into a room behind him when we hear a worker growing close.

I grasp Lore's arm to pull him closer to me because his dumbass was about to knock into a table. Lore looks between my eyes and our connection in a very telling way; he's about to say something to annoy me. I release him then hold up a finger to silently shush him. He only complies because of the footsteps nearby.

Once the steps pass, Lore replies, "I think the servant quarters are back this way."

"And why are we heading there, possibly the busiest place here and the least likely to have answers?"

Lore shakes his head as if he's disappointed. "You have much to learn."

"About what?"

"The best place to look for something of importance is in the least likely place for it to be," Lore explains. "It makes sense for there to be a safe or money in Ikehn's office, which is the first place a robber or someone like us will look. That means, if he's smart, which we're assuming he is, he'd hide this mysterious cash somewhere we wouldn't expect."

"Well... um, I guess that makes sense," I grumble while wishing it didn't. Agreeing with Lore makes me feel icky and adds to his already inflated ego.

"Considering Ikehn's status accompanied by the few tattered workers we've seen--"

How did he notice they were tattered? I barely had time to get a glimpse of any of them. Oh, he's proving more and more that he would make a very good serial killer.

"He likely sees his workers as lesser, so I figured he would hide something of importance around those of no importance to him," Lore finishes, then looks at me either for approval or to show off. Maybe both.

"I don't like when you make sense."

"You mean to say that you're jealous when I make sense." Lore swings open the door so I can't respond.

We continue through the halls that grow dingier and dingier, which further proves Lore's point. Ikehn doesn't put much care into his workers. Their quarters are nothing in comparison to the grandeur of his home. The plain walls match the equally as plain bedrooms that have the bare minimum and occasional water damage or broken window. Apparently, guests don't see this side of the manor at all. This has me second guessing Lore's assumption though. Would he risk his workers discovering what he may be hiding?

After searching a few rooms and halls, we finally come upon the empty kitchen.

"Is there some sort of spell you can do to search for anything hidden?" Lore inquires while attempting to move a countertop. "If Ikehn is the killer, he's a mage, so he could easily hide something that others won't find."

"Right, I'll try, but this cast isn't exactly the best to use when we're breaking and entering. Once I cast, I can't move without breaking it, so keep your eyes out for anyone."

Lore nods. He paces between two doors; the one that leads outside and the other that leads into the hall. I stand at the center of the room and inhale deeply. The kitchen smells like freshly baked bread and warm stew. That warmth fills me as I cast. This one takes a bit longer. It's a more complicated cast for a complex problem. But by the end, I open my eyes to peer through the walls and even a bit into the floor.

"There," I say, pointing at a hidden door in the wall.

Lore hurries over to said wall, but doesn't find a door or anything to signal it can be opened. There's more like it too; three in a lounge down the hall, one in a bedroom, four more in the ceiling, and who knows how many more throughout the house.

"This at least proves where he's hiding some of this extra wealth," Lore states while I rub my tired eyes. Everything's blurry afterwards. Lore is basically a black blob with two blue dots for eyes.

"Yeah, his home says enough, that he has another income and it's vast. The fact that he has hidden things in his home that we can't find proves he's a mage. One cast and he could open up a wall without leaving any trace," I mumble, continuing to rub my eyes.

Lore takes hold of my hand, dragging me quickly out of the kitchen in time for a worker to enter. He throws us into another room while we wait for them to walk away. By the time they're gone, my vision has returned to normal.

"This doesn't prove he's connected to Ayden's death, though," I whisper.

Lore nods. "I'll have Draven do a stakeout. If he finds anything, he'll let us know."

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Lore and Seren have got some cuddling time in! If only Seren could actually enjoy it. And they believe to have uncovered something at Ikehn's home. Do you think he's the killer or does he just happen to be a mage with lots of questionable income?

26. Taking a Chance

We search the manor a while longer before meeting up with Draven outside the fence. Lore explains what we found. Draven agrees to remain at the estate to keep an eye on things. I imagine sitting in trees and going on stakeouts weren't in his original job description, but he doesn't seem to mind. It isn't until we return to the car that I realize, without Draven, Lore is driving.

"Hand over the keys," I demand, to which Lore laughs and gets into the driver's seat. We may not make it out of the woods alive.

Lore miraculously evades the trees when peeling out of the forest onto the road. I cling to the car door for dear life once more, curious if I've perhaps left an imprint of my terror for any to see. Lore takes notice of my behavior and scoffs.

"You're being dramatic again," he states. "My driving isn't *that* bad, otherwise I'd have been in more accidents."

"I think it's safer to assume everyone in the city simply knows to stay away when they see your car heading in their direction," I argue, then whimper when he practically slingshots us around a turn. It's a miracle the rear end doesn't slam into a few pedestrians on the sidewalk, although they do scream and scatter like roaches.

"How old are you again? You should be better at driving than this!" I bellow and pray to the Holy Mothers for a reincarnation where I will never meet someone like Lore again. Specifically someone who is this terrifying of a driver. Please put him on a different continent!

"I actually didn't get a license until I was 153," Lore says while looking at me instead of the road. "But that was a little over fifty years ago."

"Damn it, keep your eyes on the road!" I scream and slam my hand against his cheek to force him to do so. He chuckles while I heave a long breath to

steady my breathing. "I guess you do this often then, breaking the law. Not only in driving, but also sneaking into homes."

"Oh, are you going to tattle on me?" Lore snickers. "If you do, you'll have to admit that you tagged along on our little adventure, ergo, you are my partner in crime."

"You didn't answer the question."

"Why should I? I feel that's too personal for our business relationship."

"You've done far more personal things than I have, like earlier when you--" I bite my tongue because, knowing Lore, he'll have fun while I get frustrated. He's definitely leading me into a trap.

Sure enough, he grins and asks, "What did I do earlier?"

"Nothing," I grumble, pathetically attempting to forget the feeling of his arm around my waist and chest against mine.

It's not right, thinking like this. Feeling like this. I'm being tricked by a dhampir like many others, intoxicated by their lies... right?

I glance at Lore, who really hasn't shown any signs of being the perpetrator. What am I doing here? What answers can I find like this; spending our days together investigating crimes like we're detectives? How am I meant to uncover the truth when there are infinite ways to how he may or may not be hiding the truth?

There's an answer in front of me, one I'd rather not face. Lore hides behind layers of deceit that I fear I haven't even begun to unravel. To get what I need, to prove to the church, and especially Olere, that they chose the right man for the job, I may have to give more. Even if I really don't want to. Even if it terrifies me.

"You're here to search for the Red Moon and we should focus more on that. Do you think Ikehn could be in league with them?" Lore asks, which I sense is his way of diverting the conversation. I wish I could stick to it, let

us continue dancing around each other until I inevitably leave. What are the chances he's the culprit or if there even is one?

A lie I tell myself to try and escape the inevitable. I have a job to do and I must do it well.

"Possibly, although he doesn't seem to be the type to be interested in their cause," I mumble.

I recall an attack against the Holy Church a few years back. I was out on a mission, slaying a group of vampires overcome by bloodlust that were ravaging small towns. It was the first time anyone had snuck into Trinia Cathedral. A young dhampir boy and vampire girl dug a tunnel beneath the cathedral. They broke in through the catacombs, then went on a killing spree. Five priests, two surveyors, and four holy knights were killed before the attackers killed each other to keep silent. They wouldn't risk being caught and the church was given a message; the vampires were ready for the next war.

"Ikehn isn't a vampire and he doesn't seem to be a sympathizer, although the Red Moon group could be using narcotics as funding. Ikehn may merely be benefiting from their business," I add.

Lore nods, appearing proud that he managed to change the subject. I wish I could be proud too. I wish I could refrain from revealing more, but everyday I second guess myself. Should I risk telling Lore about myself in hopes that I'll learn more about him, even if it leads to proving his innocence? I don't want to, but for the sake of the mission, and, damn it all, even the children, I must. I want them to be happy with Lore. Truly. They deserve it and they deserve to feel safe, which would happen if I weren't around.

"Having a business relationship doesn't mean we can't have a personal one as well," I say while clearing my throat to quiet whatever flirtatious remark Lore was certainly prepared to give. "If I tell you something personal, will you return the favor?"

Lore's gaze darkens as he considers my proposition. His hands flex against the wheel before he replies, "I suppose it depends on what you have to share."

It seems I can't skimp out on this. Telling a story about my first pet or learning to swim won't do. If I want a glimpse into Lore's past, I must give him a glimpse into mine. An unsettling thought that nearly prevents the moment entirely because Lore parks the car at the manor and grabs the door handle.

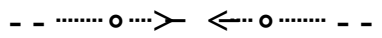
This is it. I can stop, pretend this moment never happened and continue never reliving the most horrific moment of my life.

But won't Olere be disappointed? What will the church think should they discover Lore is the culprit and I didn't do everything to stop him? My family would hate me, as they should. I can't lose them. I can't lose all I have left.

"We lived on a farm. Not our own, but one we worked and my father prided himself in that," I whisper.

Lore's hand drops from the handle to rest in his lap. When his eyes meet mine, I look away, but even feeling his gaze is too much. Then again, his gaze may have nothing to do with this overwhelming dread, this painful tension growing in my chest and the quiet screaming growing louder and louder in my mind. That likely entirely has to do with the story I'm about to tell, one I haven't forced myself to think of for almost two decades. I wished I didn't have to think of it for at least two more, but for the church, for Olere, I'll do whatever I must.

"Life was ordinary in the best of ways," I say, damn near tearing through my robes. "Mom and Dad worked hard. My brother poked fun at me everyday, only to be the first one running to me when I got into trouble. Back then, I had my complaints as all children do, but now I realize that life was... it was so amazingly perfect. But everything changed on a morning that felt like any other."



Seren is really putting his all into learning about Lore. He's even going to tell the full story about how he lost his family. What do you think happened that traumatized him so badly and led him to the church?

27. A Glimpse Into the Past

21 Years Ago

Warning: Gore and sexual assault.

Saul always poked fun at me for being babied. I didn't get up as early as everyone else, although Mama always told me that they let Saul sleep in when he was seven too. He was teasing because that's what older brothers did. As much as I fought back, as much as we called each other names, I didn't actually mind the attention. Saul was the cool older brother who worked hard and was beloved by everyone in town. I tried to be like him, someone Mama and Papa could rely on.

Mama and Papa were the epitome of great parents. They held me when I cried, told me stories when I was scared, let me try new things and never got disappointed when I became disinterested. Papa showed every ounce of love he had for all of us; dancing with Mama for no other reason than just because. Taking Saul and I on fishing trips where we'd end up spending more time swimming or playing in the mud. And Mama never lost in terms of affection. She smothered us with love and ensured we learned even if we didn't have the money for better schooling.

I loved my family with every fiber of my being. Never once did I imagine that we'd be separated. Death felt imaginary, so far away that it hadn't even crossed my mind, especially not on that day that was so exceedingly ordinary I couldn't have ever guessed what was about to happen.

In the mornings, Mama usually kept me in the kitchen to help clean up after breakfast. I wiped the crumbs from the table and carried the dirty dishes to the sink. Mama patted my head, thanked me, and started to wash the dishes--that was when Papa screamed.

Mama leapt back from the sink, gripping me so tightly that it hurt. I think I told her so, but she couldn't hear me over the panic and Papa's continued

shouting. He cursed, screamed, then called for Mama and me to run. But from what? That's when we first heard them; their laughter overtaking Saul and Papa's anguished cries.

"Mama," I whimpered, peering up at her expression of horror that sent me into a crying fit. I didn't know what was happening, but I understood it wasn't good. My lungs ached, legs shook, and soon I couldn't move at all.

Mama threw a hand over my mouth when Papa and Saul's cries went eerily silent. All I heard were our erratic breaths, then the soft creaking of the floorboards as she moved us towards a bedroom. A stranger kicked in the front door. The cold winter air stung my eyes. When I blinked away the pain, a vampire with red eyes stood in the doorway soaked in blood. His fingers kept twitching next to his side and the veins beneath his skin were so dark they resembled the roots of a tree ripping out of the dirt. The man lunged towards us. Mama screamed and flung me out of the way.

"Run, Seren, run!" She pleaded while narrowly grabbing the vampire's wrists.

"How feisty," he growled, meeting Mama's glare with a wicked smile. "I like that in a woman. Keep it up. It'll make what's coming even better."

Mama gripped his wrists so tight her nails pierced his skin. She whispered strange words that sounded like what the physician said to me when I was really sick. But Mama didn't heal him like the doctor did me. A dull white light slipped around her hands. She snapped his wrists like they were twigs.

The vampire howled. Another vampire stepped into the house, looking as mad and strange as he did. She let out a deranged laugh at what she saw, "What fun, we stumbled on a mage!"

Although the man's wrists were broken, he swayed them left to right. They snapped back into place. He licked the blood from where his bones once pierced the skin, then said, "A weak one, but that's better than nothing. She's mine, Vinah. You can have the kid."

"You won't touch him!" Mama screamed. She kicked at him, then tackled the woman, Vinah, when she came towards me. "Run, Seren!" Mama begged.

I went for the bedroom, hoping to get out through the window. The door slammed shut. No matter how much I tugged the handle, the door wouldn't budge. The only escape was through the front door, which the two vampires stood before.

Vinah giggled, "Come on, Mama, you better put up a better fight if you want to save that precious little boy of yours."

Mama looked back at me. Fear reflected in her eyes. Her hands shook, as did mine, but she gave me a smile like everything would be okay, like we'd walk hand in hand to see tomorrow, then she lunged at them.

They slashed her with claws and flung her across the room like an empty sack. I screamed and pleaded for them to stop, for Mama to stop, but she kept getting up. She landed a punch here or there, cracked a rib or broke a jaw. They laughed the pain off like it was nothing. Bones snapped back into place. Bruises healed in an instant. Eventually, after what felt like an eternity passed, Mama stumbled towards the wall. She could barely stand. Blood dripped from her busted lip. Bruises littered her warm brown skin. When she looked at me, suddenly, death felt a mere breath away.

"Stop it, stop hurting her! Leave us alone!" I finally cried, desperate to do anything. I beat against Vinah's legs. A bad move because she snatched me by the neck. Mama tried to reach me, but the man slammed her against the wall. He tore his teeth into her flesh.

I screamed. Mama didn't. She didn't struggle. Her eyes drooped. She slipped into his arms quietly, as if she were comforted by the idea of death. They fell to the floor where she grasped his arms and smiled gleefully, eyes glistening over and sighing as if she were content.

I didn't understand. I didn't get why Mama didn't fight, why she laid there blissfully ignorant to her blood soaking the rug. Wasn't she scared? Didn't it hurt? Wasn't she dying? Questions I asked while not even understanding

death, but feeling it was bad and scary and I didn't want it to happen to my family.

He tore off Mama's clothes next. Yet another thing I didn't understand, but knew it was wrong, and knew it was wrong that the vampires laughed about what they were doing. I didn't understand why they made me watch. Maybe they were amused by my terror, by how I still whimpered and called for my Mama to do something. She never did.

The fear and confusion glued me in place until he was done. He lifted his head to look at me, red eyes blazing bright. His lips twisted into an animalistic snarl. When he stood, Mama clung to him. I thought it was because she didn't want him to hurt me, but her desperate pleas were for this feeling not to go away. She didn't care about me. She didn't even see me as the monster clutching my neck began to move in, teeth bared.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. All I saw were his searing red eyes wishing to devour me. All I felt was Vinah's bloodied hand on my neck. When her teeth touched my skin, I screamed. The world screamed with me. The house shook violently. A stifling hot sensation rippled beneath my skin. Blinding light overtook the room that inevitably dimmed to reveal the vampires and Mama laying motionless across the room. My hands shook. My legs trembled. I ached all over, and yet, I never felt more alive. Something bottled up inside came flowing out, never wishing to be caged again.

"Mama?" I whimpered, stepping towards her until the vampire moved. He groaned. Mama sat up. Though she looked right at me, she didn't so much as speak my name. She searched the room for the vampire and crawled towards him, her neck dripping blood.

"Mama..." I repeated as if I thought that would wake her from the trance. Mama gripped the vampire's pant leg. With a single kick, he crushed her skull against the floor.

"Another mage, but a much stronger one," the vampire spoke around a deep chuckle, forcing bubbles of blood to form around his stained lips. The

whites of his eyes had turned bloody red and the veins in his neck bulged. "You'll taste better than the other three."

Even if I thought Papa and Saul were attacked too, a glimmer of hope remained that they weren't until he said that; *the other three.* He took another step forward. I heard Vinah behind me, felt her nails graze my wrist.

I ran.

Bolting out the front door, I came to a skidding halt among the bloody fields. Outside, impaled by the fence, was Papa. His guts hung from an open tear in his stomach. His eyes ran red, body distorted and mangled atop the bloodied fence. Neck ripped through like paper so his head sagged atop his shoulders.

Next to him, Saul was in pieces. His head hung from the wired fence by his hair, mouth gaped and eyes rolled into the back to show pure white. His legs were bent backwards over a fence post while a third vampire tore into his torso. Blood. So much blood. Everywhere. Then that vampire smiled, my brother's organs clinging to his teeth.

Why? Why? Why us? Why like this? I wondered. And the answer was given to me by the vampires rushing out of the house in pursuit; *because, so long as beasts like them exist, we'll never be safe.*

I ran through the high grass towards the forest. I heard the vampires laughing behind me, taunting me with ways I was going to die; torn to shreds like my brother, raped and crushed like my mother, tore up like my father. They grew closer. And closer. And closer.

A tree fell into my path, torn up by some unknown source. I skid to a halt, nearly slamming into the tree. Vinah laughed. Her nails pierced my shoulder. She launched me through the air. I hit a tree, fumbling back to the ground. Pain rippled through me. I scrambled to get away, but one of them jumped me. Fear. Desperation. The horror of dying like my family forced me to face him. I tore my nails into his face and screamed until my throat ached. That same burning sensation surged through my veins and scorched

my hands as it did his skin. The vampire howled. His skin bubbled then burst with blood. He veered back screaming.

I crawled through the brush, but it was three on one. Someone else grabbed me, forced me to face him. I was too tired to fight. My body wouldn't move how I wanted. My hands trembled from the burn. I was going to die scared and alone. If I knew this were going to be the end, I would have rather died on the farm with everyone else. At least we'd be together.

But then, a blade abruptly sliced through the beast's neck. The vampire's head rolled. His body dropped. Blood soaked the ground, splattered across my face like a canvas.

"You bastard!" Vinah howled.

I didn't see what happened next. I was too scared to watch. Too tired to run, so I only heard the battle. The screams of the vampires. Then lumbering steps growing closer.

"G-G-Get away, sta-stay away!" I whimpered, rolling onto my stomach in a pathetic attempt to crawl. My burned hands didn't take kindly to the broken twigs stabbing my skin.

"I'm not going to hurt you," an unfamiliar voice spoke, but all I could imagine was that third vampire tearing away at Saul. He would eat me too! "Wait," the voice repeated and placed a gentle hand on my back.

I balled up a fist, prepared to strike, until I turned and found a human staring back at me. A man in blood stained robes of white, gold, and blue. A silver chain hung from his neck carrying the symbol of the Three Mothers who Mama had told me about. The stranger knelt beside me, put away his blade, then leaned over to use the ends of his sleeves to clean the blood from my cheeks.

"You're safe now, little one," he said, moving to wipe the tears away too. "The monsters can't hurt you anymore."

"The-they ca-can't?"

"No. They're gone." He glanced over his shoulder. I did the same, relieved to find their headless corpses sprawled across the forest.

I looked at my savior with tears in my eyes. I didn't care who he was or where he came from. All I sought was a shoulder to cry on. I buried myself into his warm embrace and cried. He never complained or told me to shush. He patted my head and promised safety, which I needed more than ever before.

The monsters were gone.

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Well, this was one hell of a chapter. We have the full story of how Seren lost his family and how he, unfortunately, witnessed far too much, especially at his age. Just as a note; no, this is not a warped memory. This is 100% what happened. It wasn't staged or orchestrated by the church. I just want to make sure people understand this is Seren's legitimate trauma. What do you think about how the loss of his family has affected him? Do you feel you understand Seren a little more? How will Lore react and will he tell Seren a story of his own?

28. Family Picture

Present

Warning: Mention of sexual assault. Suicidal thoughts and the mention of a suicide.

I swear I can still feel that beasts' nails piercing my shoulder. The scent of all that blood, like rust and death, fills my nostrils. I remember the soggy grass, unclear of what was dirt and what was blood. The memories threaten to drown me. I almost wish they would, if only to see my family again.

For the longest time, I wanted to join them. I had plans to do so, to go out on my own terms. I was about to do it too, but Olere... he stopped me. He and the church were there for me. I had someone and something to keep me afloat, to give me a reason to live. It made the days easier. Helped the nightmares fade. Gave me a purpose.

I swallow back the bile in my throat to finish the tale, "Olere, a champion of the Holy Church, was the one who saved me. They had been tracking a group of vampires high on bloodlust for a few weeks and may have been searching longer if my divinity hadn't awakened."

I don't dare a glance at Lore, who has been listening in utter silence. His gaze mimics a cold breeze picking away at my already fringed nerves. They fire off like sparks at the end of a broken wire.

"After that, I was taken to the church. Without them, I wouldn't be here. Thanks to them, I was raised and loved by a new family. A family that shares my pain and understands what I went through," I add.

That earns Lore's first reaction, which is a low chuckle. I finally face him, slightly perturbed by his narrowed eyes and wrinkled brow.

"Family," he repeats the word like a curse. His cold eyes bore into my own as if he's searching for something. I don't know if it finds it. "Is this the part

where you expect me to speak of my family?" he asks, leaning back in his seat. He watches me with that same chilled look.

I don't respond, seeing as there's no point. This either leads nowhere or it'll give me the briefest glimpse of a past others may not know. I pray for the latter because, after recounting my past, I know it will revisit me tonight in my dreams. It used to when I was younger. Every night. And every night I watched my family die again and again until I could paint a clear picture to anyone twisted enough to ask.

"Fine, but know that I do not have as much to tell," Lore states with a meager shrug. He speaks as if this happened yesterday and it doesn't matter at all. "My father was a vampire, a pathetic beast with nothing to his name and a rapist condemned to death by the church after my mother informed them of what he had done to her. He was burned alive for his transgressions, then beheaded for good measure. Unfortunately for my mother, he wasn't the end of her problems. She had me. Perhaps she wanted me in the beginning, at least enough to give birth, but if so, that faded quickly. I don't recall a time when she did love me. She made sure I knew what I was and how she felt everyday, but even her hatred towards me couldn't keep her going. She lasted six years. I went to live at the orphanage after she killed herself."

I'm not sure what I expected; perhaps an ounce of sorrow or even struggling to speak. Lore gave none of that. He sits there, unfazed by a past that would certainly trouble me. There's the argument that it happened long enough ago that he has gotten over the past, but can anyone ever truly get over something like that? Can a childhood ever actually be forgotten or does the past become a scar that we pretend isn't there?

Although Lore was blunt and gave the briefest of information, I've still been given a truthful look, whether he meant to or not. Family; he spoke of his biological parents first. Not the Seymour's. That is a choice, a telling one. Could it be that, even after his troubled childhood, the Seymour family treated him even worse? Worse enough to warrant not bringing them up. Worse enough not to mention or even think of them as family. If that is true, it further points to what Olere, the church, and probably many others believe; Lore may have played a role in the Seymour family's deaths.

I can't risk pushing for that information now. I've gotten that glimpse and Lore isn't a fool. He'll wiggle his way out of whatever trap I try to set. I'll get what I can now and come back for more later.

"Were you the one who... found her?" I ask.

He nods.

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

"No need to fake concern--"

"I'm not faking it," I interject, causing Lore to scrunch up like a dog. He blinks rapidly when I add, "No one, especially not a child, should have had to witness that. Not even you."

"My heart flutters at the fact that I've received even an ounce of your concern, my sweet Seren," he says disingenuously, reaching out to attempt tickling my chin. I push his hand away before he can do something so atrocious. Then he turns oddly serious and adds, "I'm also sorry that you saw what you did. I didn't fully understand what happened to my mother either. Something like that, you don't forget it. Not even you should have had to go through that."

I roll my eyes at his mildly mocking tone. Leave it to Lore to try and joke at a time like this.

"The orphanage, were there other dhampir there?" I ask.

Lore scoffs. "What do you think?"

"You were alone."

"Squished among those mortals who would have loved to light a bonfire with my corpse." Lore chuckles like it really is all a joke, then opens the car door. He steps out before leaning over to add, "As much as I've adored our bonding moment, we both have had a long day and the children are waiting. We should head inside."

Nodding, I step out of the car. Neither of us speak. He heads off towards the school house, likely in search of the children while I go to my room.

I set aside my axe, then plop into one of the chairs. My eyes feel heavy already, but I fear the idea of sleeping. Tonight's going to be awful. Rather than risk succumbing to a nightmare, I get up to write my first letter to the church. Casting on a letter to prevent any unwanted snooping is easier than a phone.

What am I to say though? The church keeps track of their missions so they know about Lore's biological parents, but it is important to point out he spoke of them first. The suspicions around the deaths of the Seymour family could be true. Even if Lore isn't the serial killer the church is searching for, he may still be a murderer. The church needs to know. Perhaps I can make a request for his records? I read over them before I left, but now that I've been here, I may see something I didn't prior.

Lore may believe I'll hesitate to write about what transpired today, but I don't. The church has to know all that we've done and how that may pertain to the secrets Lore hides. I just make sure to angle the paper in case a tear or two fall.

A knock sounds at the door some time later.

"Seren?" Lore calls. "Oliver here has something for you."

"Oh, uh, the door is unlocked." I hide my letter under a few papers and wipe at my cheeks. Although Lore has to know I'll be sending the church updates, I don't want him to read what I've written yet. And I certainly don't want him to see me upset.

The bedroom door swings open. Lore gestures for Oliver to step into the room. Nervously, he does so, continuing to take baby steps while clutching a piece of paper.

"Here," Oliver says quietly. He offers me the paper. "I made this. For you."

I take the paper from him that's covered in stick figure drawings of everyone, including me. At the top of the page, he has written in big and squiggly letters; WELLCOME. The extra L is scribbled out, making me snicker.

"Thank you, Oliver," I say with a smile. "I'm going to hang this up right by my bed."

"Y-You're welcome."

"I see that you're also trying to tell your Papa something," I add, side-eyeing Lore. I hold up the picture to point at an extra part of the family. "I think Oliver wants a dog."

"Y-Yes!" Oliver nods eagerly, then whispers quietly to me, "Papa thought that was a horse."

Lore heard him and chuckles. "I suppose Seren has a better eye for art than I do."

Oliver tugs on my robes. I lean over so he can whisper even more softly, "Papa hasn't said we'll get a dog. Tell him to get one."

"I don't know if he'll listen to me, but I'll join your cause and do my best." I hold out my pinky for Oliver to wrap his around. We shake on it.

"What kind of pact are you making over there?" Lore asks.

Oliver rushes back over to him, holding up his arms in an obvious plea to be picked up. Lore doesn't hesitate to do so, chuckling when Oliver mumbles into his shoulder, "Nothing. No pact."

"Dinner will be ready soon," Lore says. Oliver gives me a big thumbs up behind his back before they head out the door.

Laughing, I do exactly as I promised and sit the picture next to my bed. I'll have to ask if someone has anything that can help me stick it to the wall without damaging anything. Maybe they have an extra frame?

As I look down at the picture, my heart aches painfully. In the back of my mind, a thought lingers about this odd but happy family. Maybe they'll always stay this way? Maybe Elminore's reach won't taint them. Lore, Arline, even Draven and Cyan, care for these children. They could--I hope they stay this way forever. I really, really do.

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PLEASE READ: Over the next three months, more locked author notes and story branches will be posted for this story (not a crazy amount. Maybe one of each a month?) Keep your eyes open for them and I'll try to notify you guys when they post! The next story branch is a short story from my patreon so if you're a patron, you don't have to unlock it.

Wowza, so we've learned a bit about Lore's past too. What do you think about his story concerning his biological parents? Is Seren right to assume this means that Lore's adoptive family was even worse? Will Seren and Oliver be able to convince Lore to get a dog?!

29. Violent Tendencies

The next morning, my letter to the church sits quietly on the desk. My thoughts are not so quiet. I wrote what I could, which wasn't much. As I wrote, I couldn't deny that Seymour Manor isn't as bad as I was led to believe. I have my grievances, for sure, particularly towards a certain Lord who is always unbelievably frustrating. But that same Lord treats his children well, and that leaves me constantly second guessing. The question remains; is his care true or is it a well crafted disguise? Am I losing my nerve because there are children involved? Regardless, there are unanswered questions, especially those regarding his adoptive family, that I must try answering. I make sure to request more information concerning his family. Maybe I can find a clue.

Grabbing the lackluster and confusing letter, I head off to Lore's office where he has already stated he'd be spending the day. There's paperwork to be done so the investigation is put momentarily on hold, for our part. Lore calls for me to enter after I knock, raising his gaze curiously upon seeing me.

"I've got some business to attend to in town today," I explain and adjust the axe on my back. Lore definitely gave it a slight glare, but he relaxes when hearing why I have it. "Figured I would check in with Jaryl too concerning the investigation. I'll bring back whatever he can give me."

"You're not planning to walk to town, are you?" Lore asks.

"I didn't really consider taking one of your vehicles, but if that's an option, I would appreciate it."

"Unfortunately, both cars are in use today. However, Arline and Cyan haven't left yet. Wait for them in the foyer and let them know that I insist that they give you a ride to town."

I bite the insides of my cheek, then say, "I don't know if insisting will convince them to take me."

"They will. Now go on before you miss them." Lore shoo's me away with a flick of his hand like he would a child.

Rolling my eyes, I head to the foyer where I contemplate walking. Neither Arline or Cyan will be happy to have me tagging along. Admittedly, I rather not tag along with them either.

My assumption is proved correct when the two of them step into the foyer and share exaggerated faces of disgust. Cyan, however, takes it a step further by pointing at me and saying, "Move your ugly mug, my eyes can't handle this sort of abuse without proper reimbursement and hazard pay."

"That would hurt my feelings if I actually believed I was, in any way, unattractive," I respond, causing Cyan to purse his lips and Arline to roll her eyes. Their expressions get even worse when I add, "Lord Seymour has insisted that you give me a ride into town since the other vehicle isn't available."

"Did he specifically say *insist* or are you trying to trick us? The church is good at that, spewing lies," Cyan argues and crosses his arms.

"Let's not make this personal," I hiss. "Please just let me join the drive. I have something to drop off at a church. I promise to sit quietly in the back and not bother either of you. Besides, don't you owe me a ride, Cyan?"

He freezes like a cat being caught with their paw where it shouldn't be.

Arline leans over to whisper to him, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Cyan was meant to pick me up at the airship station when I first arrived, but I had to walk all the way here. Oh, my feet were aching so bad, but I didn't make a big deal out of being completely forgotten," I explain, grinning ear to ear when Cyan seems to visibly shrink.

Arline rubs the sides of her neck and groans, "Fine, whatever, get in the damn car." She jabs Cyan in the chest with a long nail and hisses, "This is your fault."

"Shut up, I know," Cyan mumbles.

They brush past me to head for the car. I swiftly follow because I know they'll leave me behind if I don't get in immediately. However, it seems I would have had time to get in if I waited because Cyan and Arline begin to argue.

"It's my turn to drive!" Cyan insists. He jumps desperately to reach the car keys that Arline teasingly holds over his head. Poor guy isn't the tallest bloke around and, as a dhampir, Arline has unnatural height.

"You drove last time!" He huffs.

"I'm not only the better driver, but I'm also older and I have the keys." She snickers, tossing the keys from one hand to the other when Cyan nearly grasps them.

"Those are all bullshit reasons when we made a pact to alternate who drives!"

"There's no pact. You made that up." Arline throws open the driver's door, which seems to make Cyan give up. Throwing his head back with an exaggerated groan, he drags himself around the car like it physically pains him. He even throws himself on the hood, pretending to die, then slides to the passenger side.

"If you got streaks on the car, you're cleaning them off," Arline warns.

Cyan waves off her concern and puts on his seatbelt. I do the same while holding back a chuckle. They remind me of how my brother and I acted around each other.

Arline drives off. She's a much better driver than Lore so that's a huge relief, although it also isn't that much of an achievement. A toddler could

probably drive better than Lore.

"Just so we're clear, I'm not dropping you off at the church. When we get to town, you're on your own," Arline warns. She glances at me through the rearview mirror. Whether she means to or not, her eyes drift to Cyan. Concern evident within her gaze, then she glares at me. "And we're meeting at a cafe around three, so if you aren't back by then, we leave without you."

I stare silently at her for a long moment, causing Cyan to spin in his seat. Wrinkling his nose, he asks, "Why have you suddenly gone mute?"

"I think he's being a smart ass and refusing to speak because he said he'd be quiet," Arline replies.

"Not so much a smart ass as thinking you would take it very seriously, but if I can speak, then don't worry about it. I've walked to the manor before--" I grin at Cyan, who slithers back into his seat then whimpers when Arline tugs on his hair.

"I can get back on my own," I add, unfortunately letting out that held in chuckle when Cyan jabs his fingers into Arline's ribs. She might have lectured him if the two weren't suddenly focused on the one tiny noise I made.

"What are you laughing at?" Cyan challenges, spinning in his seat again to glare at me. He always feels like he's putting his fists up, preparing for a fight.

"You two," I answer, gesturing between them. "Arguing the way you do, it's funny."

I'm not sure why my response made Cyan angrier, but he suddenly looks at Arline and asks, "Have you ever wondered what happens to a mortal body when it's thrown out of a very fast moving vehicle?"

"I can take a guess, but I'd still love to see what actually happens," Arline replies sweetly.

"What'd I do?" I ask, squeaking when Cyan stabs my nose with his finger.

"You're existing, that's what!" He shouts, as if that makes sense. "Just... ugh, I wanna toss you into the sky and watch you drop."

"Why must everything return to violence for you?"

"Because the sight of you makes me violent!"

"Actually, you're naturally violent. The stupid paladin back there just amplifies it," Arline adds, which certainly doesn't make me feel any better. I think I'd take Lore's mad driving over these two seemingly contemplating how to get away with my brutal death.

Thankfully, I'm not tossed out of the car or into the sky. I am, however, left on the curbside once we reach town. Arline definitely burned out their tires on purpose to release a puff of fumes in my face. And Cyan doesn't hesitate to give me the finger out the window like a rebellious child.

I'm kind of glad I'm going to walk back. Those two are way too much to handle together.

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Arline and Cyan are certainly a handful when they're together lol The definition of chaotic. Poor Seren almost got thrown out of a moving car! Will they ever get along? lol

30. The Threat of Jealousy

Cyan P.O.V.

"You should have backed up and *accidentally* hit him with the car," I say after dropping the sentient shit stain along the curbside. Should have left him closer to the trash where he belongs if you ask me.

"It wouldn't have been an accident if I did it on purpose," Arline argues.

"That's what lying is for."

Arline rolls her eyes, although her lips twitch upwards slightly. "I've got a few items for school I need to pick up. What do you need?"

"Some equipment for the lab," I reply, then cross my arms and grumble. "Because that fumbling nincompoop snuck into my lab the other day to talk--"

"And you blew shit up? Yeah, I heard from Draven."

I squirm at the mere mention of his name, then glance curiously at her out of the corner of my eye. "What did he say... about that?"

"Nothing, just that you caused another fire hazard."

Of course. As if Draven would have anything more to say. He's probably relieved that he hasn't been waking me up anymore. I'm a useless thing off his ever growing list.

Rather than think about the bastard who takes up way too much space in my head to begin with, I gesture towards an upcoming street and say, "If you take that street, you can drop me off on the next block and I'll get what I need."

Arline takes one glance at said street, spots a plethora of graffiti and dirty pamphlets on the walls, and shakes her head. "I'm not leaving you in a dangerous part of town on your own."

Gasping, I flutter my eyelashes at her and proclaim, "Aw, you *do* care about me! As sweet as that notion is, I am perfectly capable of handling myself. No need to worry your pretty little head--ouch!"

Arline slapped me upside the head. I rub my poor abused noggin while she huffs, "If something happens to you while we were meant to be together, Lore will be pissed. Specifically at me." She waves her hand ahead of us. "Just come with me to get a few things, then we'll take the scenic route and maybe grab something to eat before heading over to your freaky science shops."

"They aren't freaky. You're just stupid--ouch! Stop hitting me!"

"Stop being annoying!"

"Your fucking face is annoying!"

This goes on for a further five minutes before we reach our first destination. I follow Arline into a shop where she has already informed the owners about our arrival. She stands at the counter chatting with the young girl who brought up some updated textbooks while I peruse the shop.

A textbook on divinity catches my attention. And by attention I mean the intense need to burn it. There are far too many of these biased texts forced out by the church while others that simply use the word *magic* or *mana* are condemned. What a load of bullarky.

"Gah!" I jolt back in surprise from a gentle touch against my arm. A worker stares at me in concern, retreating his hand while donning a polite smile, which makes him even easier on the eyes.

"My apologies, I was calling for you, but you didn't seem to hear me. I just wanted to ask if you needed help with anything," he says. Although he

didn't touch my skin, I still get an insistent urge to scratch. It's worse with strangers, especially when I haven't been going out very often.

"Uh, no, I was just looking." I swiftly put the book back where I found it before I cause a fire hazard here too. "Sorry, I was a little lost in thought there."

"That's quite alright. Happens to me all the time." The stud of a shop worker doesn't leave. He looks me up and down. I never know if I like or dislike the attention. It's a strange combination of wanting it while also being utterly terrified of the implications.

"Are you interested in magic?" He asks, gesturing at the book I previously held.

"A bit."

He smirks. "That look you had says it's more than a bit."

"Well, not to sound too egotistical, but I would describe myself as a bit of an eccentric mage with a plethora of fine skills."

Hottie here laughs. That makes me nervous, and regretful, because what the fuck do I expect to happen? Stand here and flirt with him until one of us asks the other out for a drink where I'll inevitably tell him that I can barely stand the touch of another, let alone whatever he, and honestly I, have our minds on.

"Cyan," Arline calls, coming to my rescue whether she realized it or not. I glance back to find her with the textbooks in a bag. She gestures at the door. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah, I'll be right there." I face the shop worker who offers a polite smile when I wave and back away. "Have a nice day."

"You too." Before he can consider asking anything, I rush after Arline and head out the door. She puts the books in the backseat. I hop into the passenger side.

"You're doing it again," she states when getting into the driver's seat.

I stare at her, puzzled. She points at my arm where I'm furiously scratching at the spot the hot shop worker barely touched me. Although my reactions used to be much worse, as in scrubbing my own skin off kind of worse, from time to time I still get like this. On a bad day when someone happens to brush by me, I'm itching all afternoon. Sometimes even the kids grasping my hands, wanting absolutely nothing more than to walk down the hall with me, makes me rub my hands raw under a faucet. I fucking hate it. And I fucking hate myself for doing it.

It takes all my will power to drop my hand. Arline knows it too. It's why she removed some packing paper from the bag to hand to me. Keeping my hands busy helps me forget. I pick the paper apart, shredding it into tiny pieces so ferociously that I'll run out in seconds, but then Arline says, "Be careful or Draven might get jealous."

"What shit are you spewing now?" I huff, resting the wrinkled paper in my lap.

Arline scoffs. "Don't play dumb. I saw you flirting with that guy earlier. I guess you have a thing for vampires, huh?"

"I'd smack that smirk off your face if it didn't risk getting us into a wreck. This face of mine is too pretty to scar." I grumble, then notice Arline's smirk growing until it hits me. "And I don't have a thing for vampires! The shop guy just happened to be a hot vampire, which isn't even that unusual. You guys are stupidly blessed when it comes to your looks."

She sits a little taller and beams brightly. "While that is very true, my statement still stands. Draven will be very jealous to learn you were cheating on him."

"How can I be cheating on him when there's nothing between us? Not to mention, we aren't even talking right now."

Arline clicks her tongue in a very disbelieving manner. Her tone even mirrors the sound; "Officially dating or not, you two have some weird

unspoken thing that has been going on for too long. Get over yourselves and date already."

"There is no unspoken thing!" I bellow. Although there is an *Unspeakable Incident* that has caused this misunderstanding.

"Besides, you seem to be forgetting who you are speaking about. Draven, the emotionless Draven who drives us both mad. He doesn't have feelings for anything, especially not romantic ones and especially not towards me. Who in their right mind would want to date someone who can't stand most physical contact? Who wants to scratch their skin off from a mere touch and can't kiss, let alone fuck?" I'm tearing up the paper again then crushing it all into a little ball while wishing I could do the same to my feelings. Crush them. Toss them out the window. Maybe dunk them into a tub of acid. Something to get rid of them once and for all.

"First off, not everyone is interested or desires physical contact in a relationship," Arline lectures, which may or may not ease the overwhelming dread and disgust growing in my gut. "Second off, Draven isn't as emotionless as you think, especially towards you. Need I remind you how often he keeps his eye on you?"

"Because he treats me like a child."

"And yet he doesn't watch over the actual children like he does you because you--" she taps my nose and giggles. "Are *special.* "

"Don't say special with that weird tone."

" *Special* ," she repeats, laughing. "Hey, let's grab lunch. My treat for getting you all riled up."

"I hate how you treat me like an animal and expect food to be an acceptable form of an apology."

"Are you saying no to free food?"

"Do I look like an idiot to you? Of course not!" I huff and she laughs.

I wish free food was enough to clear my head, but even as Arline and I bicker over a meal, I think back on what she said.

Draven, jealous of me? As if. He had his chance to show he felt anything for me other than a forced acquaintanceship and he chose to keep things as they've always been. I'm nothing more than a hindrance to his life, someone he watches out of duty. Not respect or even care. I'm nothing to him... I just wish he could hurry up and be nothing to me too.

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We've got another Cyan chapter! He's fun to write lol What do you think about Cyan's aversion to physical contact and how he feels about it? How are we feeling about his complicated relationship with Draven? ;D I'm planning to add a lot more about these two eventually so prepare yourselves~

31. Cute Guy at the Chapel

Seren P.O.V.

There aren't many churches in Nosa, but the citizens are friendly and happily give me directions. After a few blocks, I come upon a chapel that has likely been here for ages. The brick building rests on a street corner. Once dark bricks have faded to a light gray, although the windows remain vibrant, casting varying shades of white, gold, and blue across the sidewalk. Figures of the Holy Mothers greet visitors at the doors with open arms, guiding faithful into the safety of the chapel.

I first pray at the steps, apologizing to the Mothers for not coming sooner and hoping they understand my absence was for a good reason. Inside the chapel, a few faithful stand in front of the altars gifting the mothers soil from their crops, water from the streams, or cherished items from loved ones passed on. Lit candles line the walls. They cast vibrant light across the walls that shimmer like glass.

I wish I could have come during one of the sermons, but that's what Lore and the others would expect. If I always disappear for sermons, they'll know exactly when to get themselves into trouble without me being any the wiser. So apologizing to the Mothers once more, I eventually make my way to the front of the chapel where a priest in blue robes smiles kindly at a young girl. She shakes his hand with tears in her eyes, then walks away smiling. The priest's gaze lands on me. His eyes widen, as does his grin.

"Paladin of the Holy Church, may the Mothers smile upon you," he says, rushing over while bowing his head politely. "Welcome to our humble chapel. I am Priest Niel. How may I be of service?"

"May the Mothers smile upon you as well, Priest Niel." I bow my head, then offer up my letter that Priest Niel gently takes. "I need to have this sent to Trinia Cathedral with haste. I'll be coming here to do this again as well.

I've got a local job to do that the church needs to be updated about regularly."

"A local job? It's nothing to worry about, is it?" Priest Niel asks quietly. He glances among the faithful in concern.

"I assure you it's nothing to worry about." Seeing as, if Lore is the killer, he isn't likely to kill anyone going to church. The rich and powerful rarely believe in a power higher than their own.

"That's relieving to hear, more so that someone like you is here. I haven't met a paladin since my training days at the capital," Priest Niel chuckles, then something catches his attention. He gestures to our right. "Speaking of training, Jakoby, come here for a moment. There's someone you should meet."

Jakoby, a man likely a few years younger than me, stands tall at the mention of his name. He carries a small basket of offerings left for the church. Curls of red hair drift over pale green eyes that leave me a little breathless. He scurries over to us, almost fumbling on a pew that has Priest Niel whimpering like he expected Jakoby to do much worse. Once Jakoby stands in front of us, he looks at Priest Niel, glances shyly at me, which is painstakingly adorable, then lowers his head.

"Jakoby here will be leaving in a few weeks to start his training at Trinia to become a priest, hopefully to take over after I'm gone. Jakoby, this is--" Priest Niel looks apologetically at me. "Oh, I can't believe I didn't ask your name."

"Seren," I reply, noticing how Jakoby won't stop glancing at me. His freckles stand out even more when he blushes. It's ridiculously endearing.

"Seren, Paladin of the Holy Church," Priest Niel finishes just as someone calls for him from the entrance. A family has stepped into the church, waving and smiling enthusiastically. Priest Niel rests a gentle hand on my arm. "My apologies, I have a few appointments today. I will ensure your letter reaches Trinia as soon as possible and, please, visit us whenever you have the time."

I thank the priest for his hospitality. He walks away to attend to the family, leaving Jakoby and I. When I happen to catch his eye, Jakoby sputters, "H-Have you ever... been to Nosa before this?"

"Can't say I have."

"Then have you, um, had a chance to see the city at all?"

"Afraid not. I've been working, but I would like to make the time to see all Nosa has to offer."

"I could show you!" Jakoby blushes bright enough to be seen from the skies after his outburst. Then that blush reaches the tip of his ears when I chuckle. "I-I, uh, I mean, I'm a local and I know a lot of great spots to visit so, um, I could make a really good guide... if you're... interested?"

Absolutely. Definitely. I'm in dire need of spending time with literally anyone other than Lore and his gang of misfits. Save for the children, of course. As little as I know about handling kids, I do enjoy having them around. They're a breath of fresh air. If only their caretakers weren't as troublesome. Besides, what's wrong with taking a little day trip with a cute local? I'll get a tour, but more importantly, I will have different company who happens to also be wonderful eye candy. There is no losing in this scenario.

"Alright, I'd love that," I agree, totally enjoying how Jakoby swings his weight from side to side like he can't contain himself. "How about we try for next week sometime?"

Jakoby eagerly nods.

"And as thanks, although I don't know when I'll be returning to Trinia, I'll make sure to find you and give you a tour of the capital?"

"That'd, uh, that'd be wonderful," he says, cutely nibbling at his bottom lip. He abruptly stands a little taller and takes a tentative step back. "Will you wait one moment? I'll be right back."

After I nod, Jakoby rushes towards the back of the chapel to disappear behind a door that he almost ran into. A few moments later, he returns with a piece of paper and that sweet blush.

"Here, my home phone number," he says. I open the paper to find his name and number written slightly crooked, which somehow feels oddly fitting for him, even if we just met.

Crap, I don't know the number to Lore's manor. Hopefully Jakoby doesn't think I'm trying to avoid him by not giving my number in return.

"Unfortunately, I don't know the number where I'm staying by heart, but I'll make sure to give you a call so we can set up a date," I say, smirking when Jakoby's eyes widen at the word *date* . He swallows hard enough that I actually hear it. Chuckling, I slip the paper into my pocket. "If you'll excuse me, I've got a few things to attend to."

"Right, I'll see you soon then. Have a nice day." He waves goodbye. I return the gesture.

At the front doors to the chapel, I turn around to get one last glimpse. Jakoby stands near the altar of the church where a young girl tugs eagerly on his arm. He blushes brightly, more so when the girl catches me looking. She whispers something. Jakoby turns around, spots me, then practically catches on fire from a blush. My smile doesn't ease the blush. It was worth giving to see him pivot on his heel and nervously scurry off.

It was a good idea to come here. I've been so busy lately that I haven't had time to go out. The last date I went on ended with the guy almost vomiting after I detailed my last mission, which wasn't a good idea seeing as my missions always end in a beheading. I must make a mental note not to do the same around Jakoby. With the way he acts, he may pass out on the spot. I rather not add that to my list of many failed dates...

The remainder of my afternoon is spent at the precinct assisting Officer Jaryl in whatever way I can. There isn't much information we have, although he does update me about the dhampir brothel one of our previous suspects told us about. Officers are keeping their eye on things and it does

appear they are selling blight. Jaryl promises to keep Lore updated, which I'm relieved about. After his reaction last time, I rather not be the one to talk to him, and I probably shouldn't be the one. I may piss him off more.

Later in the afternoon, an officer is kind enough to drive me back to the manor. Cyan and Arline are back based on both vehicles parked in front of the estate. Wonder if Lore gave them a lecture for not driving me back or if he doesn't care since he at least made them take me into town. Not that I'll ask any of them.

When I step inside, I realize that I'm truly alone. Draven's still watching Ikehn's estate, according to Lore. Cyan and Arline are nowhere to be seen and, as if fate has intervened, a maid walks by donning a smile and wearing a familiar necklace. This may be the opportunity I've been waiting for...

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Oooooh, Seren has set himself up on a date with a cute guy from church. He can be charming when from time to time. Do you think they'll be able to have a good date or will Seren share a little too much about how to disembowel someone? xD What does Seren plan to talk to the maid about now that no one's keeping an eye on him?

32. Interviewing a Maid

"Excuse me," I call at the maid, who stops to smile politely.

"May I help you?" she asks. Her inquisitive eyes scan me over, visibly puzzled by my acknowledgement of her.

"Ah, yes, would you mind if I had a word with you about your time working here?"

The maid glances about nervously. Her hand rests gently on her necklace. She must know that's why I chose to talk to her. I haven't seen many others wearing a necklace of the Three Mothers. It's surprising Lore hired her at all unless he's trying to save face by hiring someone like they're proof that he doesn't mind.

The maid nods over her shoulder towards a lounge. We go there together. She peeks out the door, then shuts them prior to taking a seat on one of the couches. I sit next to her and get straight to the point because there's no telling when we may be interrupted; "How long have you been working for Lord Seymour, Miss...?"

"Maisy, Sir Paladin. I've been here for almost seven years now," Maisy replies. "My sister works here as well, but she has been here for ten years."

"I see, then has he treated you and the other works well during all this time?

"Incredibly well, although I know you may not want to believe that." She smiles almost apologetically. "We're well compensated for our work and there have been a few times where my co-workers have struggled financially. Lord Seymour always provides and never expects anything in return."

"So you'd say he's a good man?"

Maisy hesitates to respond, which confuses me based on what she has said thus far. Grasping her necklace, she takes a deep breath, then answers, "I do not believe in judging others, vampire, dhampir, or mortal, without first looking at their actions. I believe that is what the Three Mothers truly desire. I have seen Lord Seymour act kindly over the years, but I do not know him well enough to proclaim he is *always* a good man. There are times where he acts... rather odd."

"Odd how?"

"I don't know how to explain it, but he... his smile doesn't quite reach his eyes, as if he's faking his moods. I know we all do it from time to time, but sometimes it's-it's, uh, frightening." She shivers at whatever memory comes to mind.

"There's also all the business trips, far more than what I've heard of others working under Lords, and he disappears at all hours of the day and night to only the mothers know where, as does Sir Draven. None of us ever ask what their business is, but all of them are in on it," Maisy whispers the last bit, leaning in to continue. "Miss Arline and Sir Cyan, I mean. It feels like they're security, waiting for someone to attack the manor, although it has never happened before. At least not that any of us are aware of. It does make me a bit suspicious."

It makes me suspicious too, although those disappearances could have to do with his work alongside the precinct.

"How do the other works feel, like your sister? Do they feel similarly to you?" I inquire.

The more information I have, the more I can give to the church. If what Maisy says is true and things continue going as they have, I may have to inform the church that they're suspecting the wrong man. Lore is innocent, at least as the serial killer we're searching for. There's still no telling if he played a part in the deaths of his previous family though.

Maisy nods. "We all have discussed these sometimes strange behaviors and disappearances, but Lord Seymour has been so kind that we've chosen not

to look too deep into it."

She suddenly grasps my hands, holding them gently between us. "I can only take a guess why you're asking me all this, but I do want to add a bit more. Regardless of the odd behavior and disappearances, even if they worry me at times, I do earnestly believe that Lord Seymour has his reasons. Maybe he's hiding his work at the precinct or feeling stressed, but I simply can't imagine him being of any concern to the church or anyone."

Maisy holds my hands a little tighter while waiting for a response that I'm not sure how to give. She doesn't appear to be lying, although I have to consider that Lore put her up to this. He may have already talked to his staff. There are plenty of options, too many that I have to tiptoe around everything. At the end of the day, I also can't take the word of one maid while also having to at least take it into consideration. Yeah, I'm really not built for this kind of work...

"Thanks for speaking honestly with me, Maisy. I truly appreciate it." I offer her a smile.

Maisy releases my hands to stand and bow her head politely. "It's an honor to help the Holy Church. Have a pleasant day, Sir Paladin."

"You as well." I watch her exit the lounge, then fall back into the couch.

I wish I could feel only relief knowing Lore treats his workers kindly, but everything is convoluted. Maybe this is simply the truth and I can finally head home. I don't belong here nor am I meant for this kind of work. But I doubt the church will take what I've learned thus far and deem him innocent. I haven't been here long enough. Time may reveal new truths.

Being on my own allows me to traverse the first floor more thoroughly. My casts don't reveal much of anything. No hidden trapdoors, which all manors should have, in my honest opinion. What a lost opportunity. No hidden money in the walls like Ikehn's. No sign of anything peculiar, but that may mean Lore moved whatever he might have been hiding prior to my visit; under the assumption that he's the culprit, of course.

The last place I visit is the library, which is much more extensive than Ikehn's. I suppose that makes sense seeing as Lore's over 200 years old. He has plenty of time to collect some rather impressive books; even some original prints of what are now considered classics.

I brush my fingers over the spines, then slip a few books off the shelf. I've never had much time for reading. In fact, the only books I've ever completed are the Three Mothers Doctrine. Perhaps my time here could let me read purely for entertainment?

Setting a book aside, I go to grab another when the library doors open. I hesitate in retrieving the book to glance at the end of the aisle where Lore peeks his head around the corner. He smirks upon seeing me, which is enough to tell me that he's about to say something annoying.

"What a rebel." He whistles, waltzing towards me.

"I beg your pardon?"

Lore nods his head at the book in my grasp. "Grabbing a fantasy novel with a dhampir main character. Oh dear, I don't think the Holy Church would approve of such indulgence."

My skin breaks out with goosebumps when Lore brushes his hand over mine. He retrieves the book, flipping through the pages with an impish leer. "Should the church discover you were about to read this, they may cast you out, but don't worry too much. My bedroom doors are open to you."

"...don't you just mean your doors?"

Lore snaps the book shut. "No, I said what I said."

I hate that his words make me gulp.

Grumbling, I snatch the book from Lore to shove back onto the shelf. "Can you refrain from annoying me for a single day--"

"Absolutely not, I take great pleasure in it."

I ignore him in order to continue, "I wasn't going to read it. I was looking around. You have quite the collection."

Nodding, he looks about the library too as if he's remembering having read them all. Honestly though, it doesn't seem like 200 years is enough to read this much.

"I enjoy reading when I have the time," he says, then taps the spine of the book again. "You should give this a read though. It's a beautiful love story between a mysterious dhampir spy and his forbidden love, a priest to the Holy Church."

I twist my nose, half not believing him and half expecting it to be true because I've been having that kind of bad luck lately.

"I'd rather not. It sounds like a tragedy," I say.

"Suppose that depends on what you consider a tragedy."

"When they both die at the end."

"Then it is not a tragedy," Lore shrugs. "But I won't say more in case you get over yourself and give it a read."

That won't happen, but if I say that out loud Lore will lead the conversation in some strange direction. As usual.

"Is there a reason you've come to see me? I thought you were busy today." I walk around him in an attempt to escape.

"I do have something I wish to discuss," he says, heading further into the library to sit on a couch. He gestures for me to come over, even patting the cushion next to him. As if I'd sit that close. I sit on the chair across from him, which makes him smirk.

"I have an update from Draven," he declares.

Seren has managed to interview a maid working for Lore. What do you think about what she had to say about Lore, especially considering she's a follower of the church? What kind of update has Draven given?

33. No Better Options

"Don't you feel bad leaving your child there all alone for days on end?" I ask, causing Lore to chuckle.

"You saw the art room, then?" He hums, waving his hand dismissively. "Draven is nearly a century old. I think he is quite alright on his own."

Ah, I had no idea, although a century is nothing in the face of a vampire's longevity. Gold eyed vampires, the strongest of them, can live between four to five thousand years. Draven has orange eyes so he's more likely to hit the three thousand age range. Lore... I'm not so sure. Dhampir are all over the place based on their own power. They usually outlive our strongest seraphics, but sometimes pass on before their vampire counterparts.

"As I was saying, Draven has sent me an update concerning what he has seen thus far. While there were a few visitors at Ikehn's estate, Draven considers his movements to be far more suspicious," Lore explains. "Most of the visitors and those he conversed with outside of the office are not clients of the law firm, but instead those of high society."

"In other words, big money?" I ask around a scowl. It's always the rich and powerful, likely royals or branches off from the aristocracy.

"Very big, although we can assume they may want to hire Ikehn to get them out of whatever mess they are definitely in, but Draven noticed Ikehn completely disappearing without a trace."

"So he lost him?"

"Not exactly." Lore smirks and that's enough to give me an answer.

"This is more proof that Ikehn is a mage, managing to disappear somewhere he shouldn't."

"Yes, and he's clearly not registered with the church, so also another illegal activity."

More often than not, it is the unregistered mages who cause trouble. Any who possess divinity are meant to report to the church immediately, if they aren't found by surveyors in the meantime. Being registered means they can be kept an eye on to ensure no one uses their divinity to commit heinous acts. Ikehn could have had a late awakening or a minor enough one that no one noticed.

"Did Draven say if there were any particular times or places Ikehn would disappear?" I ask.

"Mostly in the evenings and to a particular club that caught his attention. Apparently, Ikehn visited frequently alongside his suspicious pals. If something is going on, it's likely happening there."

Couldn't agree more, especially after one of our suspects spoke of the dhampir brothel. A club is another common and easily workable ruse for other establishments, especially one of high class. They have the money to hire their own security, to work around any officers sniffing around. They could offer other services too, which Lore has no doubt considered.

"I'd like for us to take a look at this place ourselves, but we can't risk anyone discovering we're searching for Mr. Marshalls' killer since they may be among them," I say, looking at Lore for what he has to say. Out of the two of us, he does have more experience, particularly in this. The crimes I've worked on consisted of vampires and dhampir killing or harming mortals, not hidden drug rings or the abuse of money and power.

"Agreed. We can't risk parading his picture around the club, hoping one of them will admit to the crime. The last thing we want is for anyone there to suspect an investigation. Ikehn will likely hear of it and be scared off, regardless of whether he's the culprit we're searching for. He's clearly at least up to something."

"Right, but now the question is how we go about infiltrating without causing any trouble," I hum more to myself than Lore.

Lore claps his hands excitedly to announce; "I propose we go undercover!"

I've gone undercover before, but he sounds far too excited by the prospect, which makes me squirm.

"How can you, the Lord of Silra, go undercover?" I ask.

"You'd be surprised how many people do not know what I look like. Most of Silra, in fact." His smile is damn near demonic.

Everything about this moment screams doom. "Why do I get the distinct feeling that I'm not going to like what you have to say next?" I inquire, watching Lore suspiciously because his grin is growing wide enough to threaten tearing his cheeks.

Chuckling like a mad man, he holds a hand gently over his lips to say, "This particular club is known as a... ah, how shall I put this? Well, a sexual hot spot--"

...I'm sensing where this is going and I don't like it!

"And blight is a euphoric drug often used to heighten sexual experiences--"

I fucking refuse.

"Simply put, going undercover as a loving couple would be most appropriate, wouldn't you agree?"

"I'd rather fucking die!"

Lore expertly dodges the pillow I throw at him while gasping, "Seren, it is not polite for a member of the Holy Church to curse so passionately!"

"A passionate refusal needs a good curse!"

Sighing, Lore places a delicate hand on his cheek. He bats his eyelashes at me, feigning innocence when he knows he's anything but! "Come now, please don't be so dramatic. We'll merely be playing our roles as loving partners--"

"You are anything but loving towards me."

Lore grins. "I could change that, if you'd like."

"No, no, no, no!" I bellow, throwing my hands up in an X formation. "I refuse. Send Draven in--"

Gasping in exaggerated offense, Lore says, "You'd rather couple up with Draven than me?"

"What? No way!" I shiver at the mere thought. Draven gives me the creeps. Not to say that Lore doesn't, but if I had to choose between the two, like, this were a life or death situation I'd... actually, I'd choose neither and accept death.

I shake my head stubbornly and add, "I'm saying no to going undercover as a co-coup-co--"

Lore's grin is maddening big.

"We're not doing it!" I repeat. "Think of something else."

"This is the best way to get the job done," Lore argues, returning to his serious demeanor. He crosses his legs and sets his hands atop his knees. "We don't wish to look suspicious while also wanting workers at the establishment to approach us about whatever narcotics they may possess. As much as it pains me to admit, you would be especially useful for this mission."

"Don't try to flatter me," I growl, crossing my arms and burying myself into the chair that I wish would swallow me whole. Cyan should make himself useful and blow something up to put a stop to this conversation long enough for me to compose myself.

"How would I be especially useful?" I ask. "More so than you and Draven going on your own."

"Your magic, obviously."

I... ok, that is kind of obvious. I would have thought of it too if I hadn't--if he didn't suggest we--ugh! He's right. I hate that he's right. We'd fit in better as a couple, especially if they have blight. But then we'd have to act like we're together and that makes me want to rip out my hair. Not to mention Lore will go all out. He'll probably want us to be all over each other and that's--it's--it's just not happening! No way.

Lore either doesn't want to argue or takes joy in my discomfort because he says nothing more as I internally panic for who knows how long. Weighing the options, I know that I don't have a better suggestion and I do genuinely want to find Ayden's killer so...

"Fine," I huff with enough dejection to bury us alive.

"Wonderful! We--"

"But you will keep your hands to yourself!" I shout, jumping to my feet to lean over him and jab my finger into his chest after every word. "We are doing this for the sake of another. You will not use this opportunity to torture me."

Lore pouts. "I would never."

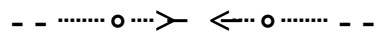
"We both know you would."

Lore bites his lip to hold back a childish grin.

"We will do what we have to, but if I tell you that you're taking it too far, you must stop immediately. None of your childish teasing," I warn.

Holding his hands up in defeat, Lore smiles and says, "As you wish, *Darling.* "

...I've made a horrible mistake.



Going undercover as a couple... tehehehe! How do you think Lore and Seren will be undercover? Are they on the right track to discovering

Ayden's killer?

34. The Cursed Corset

The suits Lore procured me have become useful far earlier than expected.

A day after we made our plans to visit the bar, I stand in front of the full-length mirror in my bathroom staring at a reflection that I refuse to accept as mine. Even during large scale events, such as the naming of a new champion, members of the church do not wear suits. We have matching robes to dictate our titles and placement among the church. I've always felt at home in them. When I saw another wearing those robes, I saw them as a friend or a part of the family.

I don't know who this is staring back at me. I don't know what I'm meant to feel. How can an item as simple as a suit seemingly strip away my entire being? I want to tear it away, to dive back into the robes I've become accustomed to. The comfortable and flowing nature of the garments that hugged me like a blanket. Suits are neither of those things. It feels too tight. I keep tugging at the collar and...

Why is my butt so prominent?! What is the purpose of this?!

I feel the urge to tug my jacket down to cover my backside, but it's too short to do so. Sexual hot spot or not, this is too much for me. If Lore honestly believes I am going to wear this, he has another thing coming!

Storming out of my room, I head down the hall towards Lore's room. However, I'm stopped when Darika and Isabella skid to a halt, both exiting Darika's room with a few pieces of garment in their grasps. They see me, stare wide-eyed, go slack jawed, then I ask, "Is... do I look that bad?"

Isabella shakes her head so rapidly I fear it may pop off. She pushes herself over to me. Her gentle hand takes hold of my sleeve, her lips pushing back into a smile like she has been presented a gift. Darika, on the other hand, grows eerily vile looking, like a witch on the verge of cursing me. Her voice is hissed like an angry snake, "You look fantastic."

I stare incredulously at her while grunting when Isabella rolls around me to tug at the back of my jacket and even my pant leg.

"Why are you saying that like it's a bad thing?" I ask.

"Because it makes her mad that you look that good," Isabella says, giggling. She moves in front of me and gives two thumbs up. "You clean up nice, Seren."

"Thanks, although I'm sure you could have made a much better suit," I tell her, smiling when she laughs and shyly waves my compliment off.

I wish I felt like what she said was true. I don't feel right in this.

Continuing to grumble, Darika and Isabella head to the chairlift. I hear it kick on followed by Darika's continued rumbles that I rather not imagine what they are.

Sighing, I continue my journey to Lore's bedroom, he claimed earlier that he'd be getting changed as well. I pound so rapidly on his door it's a miracle the door doesn't explode off its hinges.

"Enter," he calls from within, which I should have questioned because Lore is always up to something and I know better. I'm too flustered about my suit and what the girls said to think of the consequences, which is why I'm now standing in the center of Lore's room staring slack jawed at his half tightened corset.

Why in the Holy Mothers name is he wearing a fucking corset? Who let him own one?!

"Excellent timing, Seren. Help me with this," he says, facing his back completely to me. He should have punched me, it would have been a kinder way to force the air to leave my lungs.

Lore pulls up his hair, knocking the tail over his shoulder to reveal the last few rungs of his corset at the top that need tightening or, uh, rather, it'd be better if he wasn't wearing it at all. Not in that sense! Just, as in, uh... as in

he doesn't need to wear something so... form fitting. He already has a great figu--I'm digging myself into a bigger hole. A crater, in fact.

"I'll go fetch a maid," I say with every intention to escape prior to committing a heinous act, although, arguably, heresy is already happening. My mouth is too dry, my heart rate too fast, and thoughts taking a turn for the worst. The gutter would be an improvement, in fact.

"Don't be so troublesome. You're perfectly capable. Come over here," he insists while glancing over his shoulder at me. That doesn't help. It doesn't help at all because he has to notice how tense I am or the stupid expression I'm definitely wearing. Actually, he has to hear how violently my heart's beating against my ribcage.

"I... have no idea how to..." I gesture at the cursed corset that really does accentuate his wide shoulders and slim waist. Not that he needs them to be accentuated, but he's a problematic fool like that. He has to make everything more complicated than they should be.

"Are you really going to make me stand like this any longer?" Lore huffs. He flicks his fingers in a come hither manner that, for some reason, I listen to. Probably because my brain resembles a bowl of applesauce.

"Just follow the pattern," he instructs.

Swallowing the very large lump in my throat, I approach Lore to get this over with. My hands shake grasping the strings to loop in a crisscross pattern up the last remnants of his back. Strands of his long hair brush against my hands and nose from the natural movement of his breath. He smells like apples again, faintly sweet. The way he holds his hair shows off his far too tempting neck. One step forward and my lips would--

"Gah!" Lore grunts when I swiftly tighten the last bit and practically throw myself across the room. Pouting, he looks at me to say, "Couldn't you have been more gentle? It's rude to get rough without asking your partner first."

"Pa-partner?!" I repeat, not liking the way it makes him leer.

"Stop making everything weird and uncomfortable," I grumble, wishing to run to the nearest sink to scrub my hands clean like I think they've somehow been tainted. In reality, it'd be better to scrub my mind considering what it was about to imagine.

Chuckling, Lore stands sideways towards the mirror to admire his figure. The one he really shouldn't have because it's dangerous for everyone. He brushes his hair back again, which he needs to stop doing because it looks really good when he does it and I hate to admit that.

"Well done," he says while adjusting his vest slightly. He grabs the matching jacket that fits him as perfectly as everything else. It should be illegal for him to get anything tailored so precisely. I don't know where to look because everywhere is a potential hazard.

"Now the question is; do I wear my hair up or down?" Lore asks while proceeding to hold his hair up then let it fall down his back. "Thoughts?"

Groaning, I throw my hands up and ask without thinking, "Does that matter? You look fantastic either way!"

Lore smirks. I freeze.

"I meant, you... those who are attracted to, um, someone like you would find you attractive... either way," I sputter in a poor attempt to spare myself.

"Of course," Lore purrs.

Why would he purr?! Who the fuck purrs?!

In my moment of panic, Lore approaches. My limbs refuse to listen, choosing to turn to stone when Lore runs his hand down the front of my jacket. The air vacates my lungs a second time today when he next adjusts the collar of my shirt, which probably actually needed it since I had been toying with it earlier. I feel the faint touch of his fingers against my neck that shivers from the pathetically minor attention.

"You don't look so bad yourself, according to those who may find you relatively attractive," he says far too proudly, then taps my nose like a misbehaving puppy. "Come along, my love, we can bask in our undying affection after we get our work done."

"Undying... you..." I'd rather not speak after the previous screw up so I choose to pretend I'm strangling Lore behind his back.

He pivots on his heel to catch me doing so, narrowing his eyes into a glare that makes me believe he's legitimately upset, but then he opens his mouth to sing, "As future reference, I'm not into choking, but bondage isn't entirely off the table."

"What did I say about taking your jokes too far?!" I bellow.

"Don't you think pretending to cause me harm is worse than a few flirtatious remarks?" Lore asks innocently, but we both know he's not. Waving his hand dismissively, he chuckles and walks out the door. "Let it slide this time. I promise to be on my best behavior for the rest of the evening, my sweet Seren."

"I highly doubt that," I hiss under my breath while rubbing my temple in hopes that it'll somehow make the images in my mind disappear.

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Hmm, Seren feels very out of place in a suit, but let's admit it, he probably looks absolutely stunning in one. Hehehe, Lore is having way too much fun. Will Seren be able to continue resisting Lore's many flirtations? Is Lore interested in Seren or just messing with him? Will these two be able to get the job done or will it all go up in flames? In case you're curious what Lore's vest corset looks like, I left an external link.

35. Playing Partners

Lore drives us to the bar, which is a terrifying enough event to make me forget about earlier. Draven has been ordered to keep an eye on things from the outside. He'll let us know if ikehn arrives so we can avoid him or anything else comes up.

Rather than being a butler, Draven should look into spy work. He has the experience for it, seeing as that's basically what he does right now. He's also creepy and intimidating enough to force information out of people. I bet he'd do better with an undercover op than Lore and I... or I'm simply saying that as an excuse to escape the inescapable.

Lore pulls around to the front of the bar that's lit up like the night sky. Most of the street is, in fact. Lore did mention this is party central for Nosa. There's multiple bars, brothels, and gambling houses on every street, if not right next to each other for the entire street. This particular establishment is on a more ritzy side of the area where chauffeurs park cars around back and people strut around with gold tipped canes and jewels around their necks.

A chauffeur takes Lore's keys to drive the car around. My eyes blink rapidly in an attempt to adjust to the lights. I've never been to a club like this. Hell, even bars are a rare occurrence for me.

Suddenly, an arm drapes around my shoulders. I stiffen when Lore leans in to whisper against my ear, "Put your arm around my waist."

"H-Huh?"

"We're partners, remember?" He tilts his head slightly so I feel his soft lips grazing my cheek. His attempt to make others think he is actually kissing my cheek. I fear what he'll do next if I don't listen so I grasp his waist while hating that he seems to fit perfectly against me. Hating that I like the feeling of his muscles beneath my fingertips. What is wrong with me?

Inside the club, I do my best to scan the area for any kind of suspicious activity. That's harder to do than expected because not only is this place nuts, but I'm also nuts for enjoying the touch of Lore's arm and his waist in my grasp.

Focus, Seren. Focus. You're just... pent up and frustrated and Lore is doing this to tease you. Don't let him. Don't fall for his temptation. You're going on a date with an absolutely adorable guy in a week or so. He'll get your mind off troubling things.

Shaking my head, I attempt to focus on what's happening around us. There's a gambling station to the left, a dancefloor ahead, a bar to the right, and private quarters upstairs, which Lore requests. The man at the front desk smiles like he's going to say no or claim we can't afford it when Lore pulls out a hefty wad of cash. One look at the cash and the man laughs, "Please, follow me."

We're led up two flights of stairs to a dimly lit hallway where the man opens a thick black door. Inside, the room's decorated in deep purples and dark leather. A chandelier hangs from the ceiling, also letting off dim light. A sofa loops around one side of the room where a mini-bar rests against the opposing wall. To the far left, there's a bed and who knows what inside the long bedside drawers.

"Here's a menu of our finest items. Please take your time considering what you would like to order," the man explains, then points to a button on the wall by the sofa, then another by the bed. "To call for a staff member, you need only push one of these buttons. We'll arrive momentarily."

Lore thanks the man while locking the door behind him.

"Not bad," Lore says. He observes the room, checking the bar then heading to the bedside drawers. I take a seat on the couch, refusing to look when Lore laughs. "Hehehe, they really do have quite a lot of options for a pleasant and surprisingly creative evening. Come see, *my love.* "

"I'd rather not, *Honey,* " I spit only to regret it immediately.

"Honey, how drab. I'd rather be called something cute and mildly cringy, like snookums or ducky."

I curl my nose and begin looking over the menu since I'm assuming we need to at least order something. "Why ducky?"

Lore shrugs. "It sounds sweet and endearing, wouldn't you agree?"

"Sounds like you want someone to throw bread at you at a park." I grunt when Lore plops down on the couch next to me, then I take the deepest breath I may have ever had when he swings his legs over my lap. He sits so he's facing me, one arm on the back of the couch. Long fingers run through my hair and dance over the back of my neck that heats up from the attention.

"What are you doing?" I ask, hoping my voice isn't trembling as badly as my hands.

"How often will I have to remind you that we're playing partners?" Lore sighs. He suddenly removes his jacket to toss on the arm of the couch, then points at me. "Take yours off too."

"H-Huh?"

"Your jacket and let's undo a few buttons." He reaches for said buttons, but I smack his hand away.

"I'll take off my jacket, but that's it."

"Why? Are you worried what's under your shirt won't impress me?"

"Like I care if I impress you or not." I groan while trying to remove my jacket because it's a bit hard to do in this position. "Mind moving your legs? You're heavy."

He places an offended hand on his chest. "Are you calling me fat? That is a horrible way to treat your date."

"Lore."

"I'm comfortable and you're a big strong paladin, you should be able to get through this fine."

He's living for making this more complicated.

After some minor struggling, I manage to slip out of my jacket and sit it aside. Lore uses his long ass legs to hit the button to summon staff with the tip of his shoe, which is somewhat impressive while also being incredibly childish.

The situation worsens when staff arrives to take our order because Lore wraps his arms around my neck to pull me close. He rests his head against my temple, smiling gleefully while the very professional staff member jots down whatever Lore is spewing without batting an eye. I'd be fretting over the cost of all he's ordering, but I'm too busy panicking about the close proximity.

Fuck, he smells really good. And his skin is soft. And his hair could rival silk. What does he bathe in? Shit, now I'm thinking about him bathing...

"One other thing," Lore says. His fingers suddenly grasp my chin, forcing me to face him. There's amusement in his eyes and likely fear in mine as he leans in so close that I practically feel his lips on mine. "Do you happen to have anything that'll... heighten our evening? My partner here is a bit shy."

Fortunately for all parties involved, Lore looks at the worker with a smile while I lower my head to hide my expression. My face is too hot. I can't stop shaking. Lore's hand now resting on my neck makes my toes curl. Feels like the room's on fire and it's all because of the heat between us that's too intense to handle. That shouldn't be this intense. That shouldn't even be crossing my mind and yet...

"Seren... Seren?"

I push Lore off me so hard that he almost tumbles off the couch. Good thing the staff member's gone, otherwise that would have looked bad on us, but my brain isn't exactly functioning as it should at the moment. Nothing seems to be.

"Didn't I warn you about taking things too far?" I hiss again, recalling the sermons preached to me since childhood about vampire and dhampir and all their wrong doings, the ones that do absolutely nothing to help this aching feeling in my chest.

"Then what do you consider far enough?" Lore sighs. He rests his elbow on the back of the couch and his head on his hand. "We're here to convince the staff that we want a euphoric drug. If we're just two guys sitting on the couch, they're going to think something is up. This--" he swings his fingers between us. "Has to be believable and that means being close. It's not as if you haven't been close to a dhampir before, although I admit it must be very different to you since I'm still breathing."

I send him a glare that does nothing more than prove his smirk is practically a permanent expression.

"At least... give me a warning before you do something first," I mumble, although it's doubtful that'll help. The whole problem is him doing anything at all. Being this close, even if it's for a job, doesn't sit right with me.

"Fine, would you prefer to be practically sitting in my lap so we're still convincing when our order arrives?"

"No."

"Then shall I return to our previous position?"

This job is going to be the death of mine.

"Fine, but don't make me look at you again," I order, stiffening immediately when Lore gets back into place. My entire body shivers after his hand rests on the back of my neck.

"You really are so dramatic," he says, then glances around the room. "There must be a mage working here. With the rooms this close, I should be able to hear what's going on, but it's silent. It is a great place to discuss business under the guise of having a good time."

I hum because I'm too busy reciting the Three Mothers Doctrine to keep myself sane.

Moments later, the waitress returns without what we're hoping for. She brought up samples of aphrodisiac foods, nothing more. I glance at Lore, who is better suited to make a decision in this situation. He merely smiles, thanks her, then sends her on her way.

After the door closes, I force myself to ask, "Was this a bust?"

Even after all I've been through!

"No, they may have strict rules on who they hand out blight to. We merely need to find where they're hiding it." Lore does me a huge favor and gets up, allowing my tense legs to relax, and body to practically melt against the couch. But then he flicks my forehead to get my attention. "Come on, we have some leg work to do."

I think my legs have done more than enough work tonight, but I'd rather die than admit that aloud.

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Tension, we love it~ especially some forbidden tension. Mmm, the best **chef's kiss lol Will our boys be able to find proof of blight being at the bar? Will Seren make it out of this job alive?!**

Behind the Scenes: Creating the World

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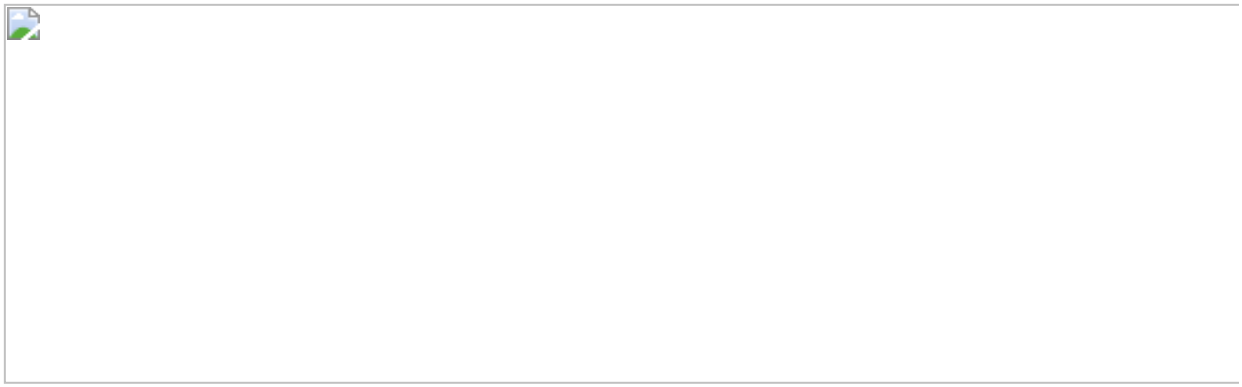

36. Sneaking Around

"We'll split up," Lore says. "There are three floors. You can take the first since it's the busiest."

"Why do I get the busiest floor?" I ask.

"Because you're a mage who can spout a few nonsensical verses and turn yourself into an ugly vase."

"I can do no such thing."

"Really? Pity. Such a missed opportunity. What about some rather expensive but ultimately disappointing cutlery?"

Sighing, I ignore his childish remarks to remind him, "Didn't you say there is a mage working here? If they're skilled enough, they may notice my movements."

Lore's wicked grin is downright infuriating, as is his question, "Implying you aren't skilled enough to hide said movements?"

"I am more than capable of handling myself."

"Then prove it."

I shouldn't let him rile me up... but it's working, and he makes a point. If either of us can sneak around a crowded room, it's me. His trait has nothing to do with stealth. In fact, power absorption and any form of releasing it would easily get us caught.

"We should take an hour to search, then meet back up in our room to order something else," I suggest.

Lore nods. "Agreed. I'll see you in an hour."

He opens the door to step out into an empty hall. I follow him, then head alone for the stairs all the while trying to sense out the mage. Pressing my palm to the wall, I concentrate on more than the sounds, the smells, and the lights. I search for the presence of divinity flowing through these halls, different than my own and being used, which makes it easier to find. Sure enough, Lore was right. There's a mage, but not a powerful one. Their main job is probably only to keep the rooms secured for private conversations. I won't have to worry about casting, which is good seeing as two guards stand watch at the bottom of the first set of stairs.

The guards are easy enough to pass. A simple incantation and I vanish into thin air. I have to hold my breath and move slowly down the second set of stairs to reappear in a dark corner of the first floor. Facing the wall, I gasp for a much needed breath, then slip into the crowd of gamblers and drunks.

Would the owners risk any of these people stumbling onto what they're doing or do they expect a busy first floor to more easily hide what they're up to?

I search and search, narrowly avoiding a few far too handsy patrons. One woman successfully squeezes my ass with enough force to bruise and a man nearly rips my arm out of its socket to drag me over for drinks and gambling, although I don't think he hoped for the night to end there. At least the incidents make me appear like a fumbling patron, desperate to avoid unwanted attention while I sip on some very strong and bitter wine. I'll never understand the fascination and obsession with alcohol. It all tastes like shit or not good enough to warrant the price, in my opinion.

Time ticks away without so much of a glimpse of what we're looking for. Patrons party, and though I spot dealers among them slipping a pill or two from one person to the next, none of it is blight. Regardless, I make note of it to inform Officer Jaryl.

There's barely ten minutes left when I spot a worker hurrying to a pair of guards. They signal for more until a group of five follow the frantic worker towards the back of the establishment. I slip my way through the throngs of people. The guards are quick, almost too quick. I nearly miss them passing through the kitchen doors. A swift incantation accompanied by a very deep

breath and I disappear. Servers pass through the doors regularly so I follow one inside. Wouldn't want anyone wondering why the door opened and closed on its own.

Dodging the frantic bodies in the back, I manage to catch up to the guards. I finally get my wish when a server pulls on a wine bottle and the floor opens up. A secret passage, awesome! At least the owners have good taste in architecture.

The group descends the spiral staircase. At the bottom, the server opens a heavy iron door. There's a ruckus behind it. The breaking of glass and shouted curse words. The guards rush in. I manage to peer through the masses to see inside. A long table sits in the room where vampire and dhampir alike sit around it, uncaring of the fit behind them, as if it has happened before. A few of them pierce thin paper atop bottles with their fangs, allowing their toxin to drip into said bottles. The door shuts before I can determine what the commotion is about.

"Blight," Lore whispers. I nearly scream from the shock of his sudden and unexpected presence. He narrowly misses me slamming my shoulder into his chin too.

"Lore, what..." I nervously glance behind us. The door has already shut. Neither of us would have made it in without being caught. Huffing, I reappear and glare at the foolish dhampir. "What are you doing down here?"

I'd ask how he knew I was here, but dhampir, like vampires, have a freakishly good sense of smell. Once they know your scent, they can likely tell you're in a crowd of a thousand the moment they step into the room.

"You weren't there," he says, pointing up in reference to our room. "So I came down and caught a whiff of your scent in the kitchens."

"And how did you get through the kitchens without being seen?"

Grinning, Lore presses a finger to his lips and whispers, "Secret."

I eye him suspiciously. It has been years since a dhampir or vampire has snuck up on me. I've always at least known they were in the vicinity, but Lore appeared out of thin air. He puts me on edge. More so now than usual.

"You can do that invisibility trick on both of us, can't you?" Lore gestures over his shoulder. "We better leave before anyone notices."

Setting my concerns aside, for now, I instruct Lore to hold his breath and keep a firm hold of his arm. The bastard tries to hold my hand until I pinch him.

We sneak back up the stairs and through the kitchens. Before we reach the door, a commotion starts at the back of the room. We both turn around to watch the guards dragging a bloody vampire through the back doors. I almost expect Lore to follow, but he looks at me patiently. Together, we return to our room without anyone being the wiser.

"Now that we know this place deals, it's safe to assume Ikehn's either in on it or aware of it," Lore says while munching on some of our food that has gone very cold. Not that he seems to mind. "We should do a stakeout across the street, keep an eye open for Ikehn and who he associates with."

"Maybe we could follow one of those associates?" I suggest.

Lore nods. "My thoughts exactly. It's still early. He may even show up tonight."

A hopeful thought that doesn't come to fruition. Although Lore, Draven, and I wait at a hotel next door that has far too many shades of red and pink in one room and a very questionable chest at the bottom of the bed, Ikehn never turns up.

However, Ikehn arrives on the second night of the stakeout. He spends a few extra seconds speaking to one of the chauffeurs, which immediately piques our interest. Especially when the chauffeur doesn't stay at work for longer than five minutes.

"It isn't suspicious to see someone speaking to a chauffeur," Lore says exactly what I'm thinking. Donning an impish grin that I find far more acceptable when it's not teasing me, he adds, "I think we should follow. Draven, stay here."

Draven never questions Lore, even if I've caught him glaring at a faulty piece of equipment that keeps slipping out of the ceiling. All I notice is a leather strap before Draven swiftly hides it again. I don't think I want to know what it actually is.

Although, the alternative to staying with Draven is being tortured by Lore's driving skills. I'm clinging to the car door as he slingshots us through the streets to follow the chauffeur.

"Keep driving like this and he'll notice we're following him," I warn Lore to which he laughs and steps on the gas.

Miraculously, or the chauffeur is an idiot, we aren't caught tailing him. Lore follows the car through countless streets for seemingly an eternity. Maybe he was taught to drive around in case someone was following him, but he isn't very good at his job.

Lore parks a block away from where we saw the man slow down and park. We're in a business district of town, overcome by warehouses. Unfortunately, none of them are abandoned. I'm a little disappointed seeing as I'm always hoping for the cheesy villain lair. After Lore and I step out of the car, he abruptly grasps my waist. Before I can even curse at him, he jumps to the top of a building to land on a roof.

"You could have warned--"

Lore shushes me while gesturing towards the back of the warehouse. We keep low while slowly moving back and eventually lay on our stomachs to get a good look of the place where the chauffeur went to.

Armed guards wait at the entrance to a large warehouse, which isn't unusual, but what the chauffeur says must prove our suspicions because Lore grins and repeats what he heard to me; "Ikehn wants this place cleaned

out by tomorrow night. There's too much heat in the city. They're changing locations."

"He didn't mention that what they're moving is blight though. I doubt that'll get us a warrant," I say, but Lore chuckles.

"I'm Lord of Silra, I *am* the warrant." Then he jumps down to land right in front of the guards.

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Seren and Lore have found a fishy warehouse belonging to Ikehn, but does it contain blight like they're hoping? Lore, I believe this may be called abuse of power, but you're cute so I think we'll let it slide lol

37. Lore's Trait

That idiot! We don't know how many people are here or what they're capable of!

"Good evening," Lore says like he's merely taking an evening stroll to get some fresh air.

The guards and chauffeur stare incredulously at him. Chanting an incantation, a golden arrow forms in my grasp. Seeing as Lore showed himself, our best bet is to knock these three guys out prior to any alarm being raised. The first guy goes down swiftly from my arrow hitting his chest. The cast is nothing more than a sleeping spell. He drops, as does the guard beside him from Lore's sudden lunge where he punches him upside the head. The chauffeur almost notifies everyone by shouting, but I knock him out too. Lore smirks back at me.

"How easy was that?" He chuckles, watching me descend from the roof on a golden rope.

"You're lucky none of them fired a shot." I knock my foot against the jacket of one of the guards. Sure enough, there's a pistol at his waist that he was about to grab had I not shot him first.

"I didn't know you were skilled enough to know long range sleeping spells. I heard most mages have to be close to get off such an attack."

"Don't forget that I'm a paladin to the Holy Church for a reason."

Something about Lore's smile makes me shiver.

"Indeed you are," he whispers, then grabs a ringlet of keys from the guard's waist and opens the warehouse doors. A pungent smell of metallic yawns from within. The scent of blood coats us like a film. Lore gags and covers his nose, which must be getting an even worse smell than my own.

No one notices us standing near the entrance. The many workers within stand behind rows of plastic curtains, revealing their shadows frantically moving about. Between the curtains, we catch a glimpse of vampires and dhampir alike doing exactly what we saw at the bar, only most of them look beyond exhausted. During schooling, the priests of Trinia explained that vampires and dhampir do have limits to their toxins. It takes their body time to make and store it. No doubt Ikehn's pushing them to the limit, to make as much money as he can. After all, they're all replaceable.

Lore's movement brings my attention back to him. He glides a few steps away to a powerbox on the wall. Ripping the box open, he grasps the wires within. I almost shout at him in surprise until I remember his trait; power absorption. Sparks of electricity whirl around his hand that don't so much as sizzle.

"Come over here," Lore orders softly, gesturing for me to stand behind him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I hiss, but do as instructed.

"Catching everyone at once," he explains, then stretches his hand out towards the room. Someone within finally notices us. Their eyes widen. She grapples for a gun at her waist. She isn't fast enough.

A surge of electricity shoots out of Lore's hand so ferociously that it nearly sends me to my knees. Lights flicker sporadically. The plastic sheets vaporize. Those within the warehouse spasm from the shock rattling their frames. Then they drop when Lore lowers his hand and blows the smoke away from his fingertips.

"Lock up the doors in case anyone wakes," Lore instructs while tossing me the keys. "I'll call Officer Jaryl."

"And the hospital, right?"

Lore sighs. "Yes, yes, and the hospital."

I step around the mess tentatively. People groan on the ground, surrounded by shattered glass and a few flickering flames. While Lore calls the officers,

I make swift work of locking the doors and putting out any of the fires started. I wish he'd do it instead. When I step close to the tables of blight, my throat runs dry and my hands shake. A sickness builds in my stomach, memories in my head that flash in vicious cycles. The scent of metal. My aching limbs. The tightness around my wrists, ankles, and neck.

"I love a paper trail when it gives us everything we need," Lore snickers, descending the stairs from an office a floor above, the only one like it. He reads over a stack of papers then shakes them in my direction. "Lists of blight buyers signed by Ikehn himself. We got him. I already told Officer Jaryl to pick him up."

"Can they do that? You did throw yourself at the guards, entered without a warrant, and electrocuted everyone."

Lore shrugs. "We had reason to believe they were selling blight so we entered and our suspicions were proven correct. I merely caught them before they could kill us. Mission accomplished."

"But Ikehn is a lawyer and a damn good one. If he finds a way out, we'll never know if he actually killed Ay--" I stop short when Lore picks a paper from the stack to show me. The text has a list of names and what they're delivering. Ayden Marshalls is on the list.

"So Ikehn sold blight and used Ayden to deliver the goods, but we don't have proof he killed Ayden himself. He could have hired someone and that mage may not be here," I declare.

"True. We'll figure this all out after the arrest," Lore says, not sounding nearly as concerned as he should be. I try to put a little faith in him since he has done work like this longer than I have. Maybe there's something he knows that I don't.

Not long after Lore's call, officers and ambulances arrive. Perfect timing too since some people were starting to wake. Officers hurry inside the warehouse to process the scene. None of them seem all too shocked to see or learn of how Lore caught everyone at once. I'm almost tempted to ask someone to tell a few stories of other crimes Lore has helped solve.

However, if he learns I'm doing that it'll make him way too happy. No doubt he'll bug the hell out of me for asking about it. I rather spare myself the torture.

"Your Grace." Jaryl smiles and shakes Lore's hand enthusiastically. "We thank you again for all your help. I sent a team to retrieve Ikehn and they should be back at the precinct before us. I thought you should also know we did more digging into Ikehn's bank records. There are a few mistakes, tax evasions mostly, so there has to be much more that we can pin on him."

"Good. The more we have on him, the more likely he is to talk about Ayden Marshalls. Did you tell your men to be careful?" Lore asks. "There may be a mage among them, perhaps the one who killed Ayden if it wasn't Ikh--"

A loud explosion rings out at the end of the alley. Fire roars high, casting plumes of smoke into the sky. A car flies through the air, crashing nearby. I tackle Lore to the ground in time to evade a pipe that soars through the air. This would be the moment he taunts me. Instead, he grasps my arm and pushes me off to swiftly rise. Something above us caught his intense gaze. I follow his deep expression to discover Ikehn hovering within the night sky. The roaring inferno illuminates his shaking silhouette. Veins throb in his temple. His eyes are bloodshot from rage.

"You rotten bastards!" He roars. Divinity flows into his hands in wisps of silver light. A color that surprises me. White is the most common color of divinity, for those who lack formal training. Typically, only trained magic users cast in silver. He must have used some of his money to get a teacher.

"Calm down, Mr. Bellvitz," Jaryl speaks. He raises his hands like he's surrendering and maintains a calm expression. The officers, however, ready themselves to fire. "If you come down and let my officers take you back to the precinct, we'll pretend like this didn't happen."

Ikehn snorts. The divinity grows in his palms until they're more vibrant than the moon.

"Whether this happened or not doesn't matter--hey!" Ikehn's blaring gaze fixates on me. His lips tremble in a rage as he points the power building in

his hands at me. "I know what you're up to, Paladin. Show me your hands and keep your lips sealed! If I sense even a smidge of magic from you, you're dead!"

Frowning, I raise my hands above my head, dispersing the divinity I had been trying to store. Whatever attack he's about to do will be big. I could at least lessen the damage, but not like this.

"Nobody move!" Ikehn bellows next.

Officers remain frozen all around, their hands once hovering over their weapons slowly raise above their heads. Even from here, it's obvious how infuriated Ikehn is. Maybe we should have seen this coming. The way his office was, the kind of perfection, he probably can't stand being outwitted. He rather go out like this on his own terms, fighting, than sit in a jail cell.

"Should you really be throwing such a fit about this?" Lore laughs like this is all a joke, earning a few harsh glares because why the fuck is he agitating him?!

Lore continues by waving his hand dismissively at Ikehn. "You've already lost. Give it up. We have far better things to do than wait around for you to finish your tantrum."

"Do you have any idea what I could do to you?!" Ikehn roars, rising higher as the divinity pulses so ferociously that it carries a physical sound, like the bell of death ringing for us all. "How dare you speak to me like that?! I could level this whole fucking block before even you could escape the blast, *Lord Seymour* !"

"Is that so? Do it then."

What...?

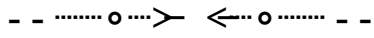
"Go on." Lore waves his hands in a come hither manner, grinning all the while. "I truly hate those who make promises they don't keep."

Ikehn raises his arms. I try to cast, but in a single burst, Ikehn sends a blast of seething silver light. I wait for the pain and an endless darkness.

Neither come.

Indescribable heat roars beside me, one that radiates and pulses like a heartbeat. Someone grabs my arm, tugging me behind that seething warmth. My eyes open, squinting at the light in front of me. Lore shines as brilliantly as a star, eyes shimmering like turbulent ocean waves in a violent storm that knows nothing can stand against it. He absorbs every ounce of Ikehn's power. I haven't the time to ask how, regardless of his trait, Lore shouldn't be able to absorb divinity! Vampires and dhampir do not have bodies that can contain it. This should kill him!

But then Lore stretches out his hands and sends the shot back at Ikehn. The force sends everyone to the ground. A wave of heat and light hangs overhead, then the world goes silent.



Uh oh! Lore and Seren may have been able to capture the warehouse, but Ikehn has shown up and he is not happy. Can Lore really handle Ikehn's power when dhampir aren't meant to be able to handle magic? Is this going to seriously hurt him or will he be okay?

38. Seren the Strange One

When my eyes will themselves to open, Lore stands atop charred ground. Donning his usual grin, he looks at me and laughs, "I must admit, that was much stronger than I expected."

"Are you... *are you insane* ?!" I scream, scrambling towards him.

There's heat all around, enough to suffocate, but my unsteady breathing has barely little to do with that. I can't look away from his hands, the ones I can't clearly see through the smog. Lore stares wide-eyed when I grasp said hands to inspect the damage. Dhampiri cannot use divinity. They cannot absorb divinity! It's never happened. There's a chance he won't heal from the damage. What if he lost his hands entirely? This damn foolish fool! Doing something so ridiculously stupid--

There's nothing. No damage. His hands are obscenely warm and trembling, but there's no blood, burns, or any sign of a broken bone. He's fine.

"Is there a reason you're groping my arms?" Lore questions after I've thoroughly touched and pinched his hands and arms until I get to his shoulders where I do the same. He stiffens uncharacteristically and eyes drift from left to right like he's searching for someone to stop me.

I heave a long, steady breath. He's okay. He's really okay. Praise the Mothers, if he wasn't okay I'd--I--I don't know.

"How...?" I rest my hands on his shoulders, continuing to eye him suspiciously. "You shouldn't--that should have killed you."

"While I am thoroughly touched and somewhat aroused by your concern, as you can see," Lore outstretches his hands. "I am more than alright."

"But how?"

"My trait is power absorption, which I can contain and use later in terms of things like electricity or even heat. Magic, on the other hand, I can only absorb momentarily and send right back out." Lore observes his own hand. His gaze darkens.

"The first time I tried absorbing magic didn't work out so well. The bones in my hands and arms were shattered. A maid had to spoon feed me for a month," he adds, making the previously dark expression disappear with a grin. "But now I've gotten used to it. As long as I get the magic out immediately, I'll be fine."

Immediately. He could have still got seriously injured, this idiot!!

"That's lucky for us," Jaryl says. He glances between us, his eyes lingering on Lore's shoulders that I now remember I'm still grasping. The very firm and strong and wide shoulders that I should be letting go of. Please, for my sake, let go.

Clearing my throat, I retreat and ask, "Where... where's Ikehn? Did he..."

"Perish," Lore finishes for me. "Absolutely." He nods ahead to a few ashes fluttering in the wind. "You can look for a few pieces of him over there, if you'd like."

"Well, we at least got proof that Ikehn was an unregistered mage," Jaryl says. "Although now we don't know whether he killed Ayden himself or ordered someone else."

"He definitely did it himself."

"How are you so sure?" I ask Lore, who stares at me like I asked a dumb question.

"Do you remember his office? Ikehn was an obsessive perfectionist."

I recalled the same observation earlier.

"A job like that, getting rid of someone who knew too much, I highly doubt Ikehn trusted anyone else to finish the job," Lore explains. "And, as a mage,

I hear it's unbearable hiding their magic. The scene at Ayden's, all that power he used, was likely due to holding his magic in so long. He lost it, like he did here today."

"That would make sense, but we still don't have concrete proof," Jaryl reminds him. "Regardless, we all thank you for your help today, Your Grace. We can handle the rest from here. I'll let you know if we find anything else."

"Officer," I call, earning his attention prior to leaving. "I haven't seen anything during our investigation, but do let us know if there's any evidence linking back to the Red Moon group." They are who I'm meant to be pretending to investigate, but all I have is that pin from the vampire attack a while back.

"Do you suspect that they are?" Jaryl asks.

"Not really, but you never know. They hide themselves well and use what they can to get what they want. Ikehn may have nothing to do with them or perhaps he did business with the group. We have to check every angle."

Nodding, Jaryl promises to do just that.

After saying our goodbyes, Lore and I head back to the car that was, thankfully, parked far enough away not to be burned to a crisp. Then again, maybe it'd be better to walk back to the estate than suffer through Lore's driving. However, when we get in, he doesn't immediately step on the gas.

"Is something wrong?" I ask around a yawn. Now that things have calmed down, exhaustion's settling in. I never thought I'd be so eager to return to the estate and get a good night's rest. The bed here has grown on me.

"Thank you, for earlier," Lore replies, puzzling me.

"What are you talking about?"

"You tackled me," he explains, wearing a softer expression than usual. "You could have let the pipe hit me. It would have done more harm to you than

me had it hit you instead."

"How weak do you think I am?" I chuckle while leaning my head back. My eyes are almost too heavy to keep open. "I'm not going to let you get hurt because I know you'll heal. You'd still feel the pain."

"Implying you don't want me to get hurt?" Lore leans in to whisper against my ear, ensuring that I am now very much awake. "That's very sweet of you. It almost makes me think that you care."

He retreats to rev up the engine. Surprisingly, he carefully drives out onto the street, at least as careful sa he can be. The soft jostle of the car makes my eyes droop again, but I have something to say. I don't know why. I'm being foolish, but the words won't grant me rest until I speak them.

"Lore," I call quietly, so softly I barely hear myself over the engine. "Listen, I know you taunt me. I know you hate me for what I do, what I stand for, what I believe in, but believe me when I say; I will never cause a vampire or dhampir any harm who hasn't already harmed others. Even if I believe the day will come when you too will lose all self control, until that day comes, I will not hurt you nor do I want to see you, or anyone like you, hurt."

Lore's hands tighten on the wheel.

"I also know that you think that is very dumb," I continue. "Knowing you, you'd tell me I'm a brainwashed idiot who tells myself that to help me sleep better at night."

Lore chuckles, though it doesn't sound amused. "You know me so well. I'm flattered."

"And I know you tease in an attempt to hide yourself from serious conversations you aren't ready to face yet."

He doesn't reply to that.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'd do it again, even if I knew I'd get hurt in the process. Interpret that however you like." I finally close my eyes, barely hearing Lore's quiet words.

"You're a strange one. Has anyone told you that?"

"Maybe once or twice."

When I was younger, during my training, I remember being told I'm too soft. That one day it'd get me killed, but I never actually minded that. If it's wrong to be kind even to those I hate or fear, then I rather be wrong. Maybe that does make me a fool. Maybe that will get me killed, but it's the path I choose and I'll accept the consequences.

I must have fallen asleep in the car because when I next wake I'm laying in bed. My clothes smell of smoke. They're hot so I groggily toss them off. Curling beneath the blankets with nothing but my undergarments, I fall back blissfully into slumber without considering how I got into bed.

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Hello, hello friends! Quick announcement. If you aren't already aware, I have a new novel available on Tapas called The Matchmaker Prince. It's an adorable romcom between a fairytale prince brought to the modern world and the fumbling author who created him. If this sounds like something you'd be interested in, use the external link to find it or go to my wattpad profile. I left a link on my dashboard!

Back to the story! Wow, Lore completely annihilated Ikehn. My, oh my, Seren was pretty concerned about him, tehehehehe! And they had a moment in the car! I always find Seren fascinating, how deep down it's like he knows he wants everyone to live together peacefully, but he's so frightened and brainwashed that he can't let go. Maybe Lore will help with that, hmm? ;D

39. Draven's Own Volition

Cyan P.O.V.

One may be wondering why I'm standing in Draven's room in the middle of the night wearing a headband and apron while carrying cleaning supplies. That would be an excellent question, which I have a superb answer to!

Draven and I haven't made up after that rather meager incident in my lab because he's a petty bitch like that (and by he, I mean both of us, really.) Draven hasn't been waking me up or checking on me. I haven't been speaking to him either, although I wouldn't have been able to even if I tried. He's been so busy that he hasn't returned often, which has to do with why I'm in his room. I thought it'd be a grand idea to tidy up his room since he hasn't been around. That's nice, right? A great way to start an apology...

Except we live at Seymour Manor where there are maids and butlers who clean our rooms for us. Draven's room is already spotless. Why does my brain only function in the lab? Once I leave the science environment, it's like my intelligence leaks out of my ear to vacation in a jar until I return like a fucking loser.

"What are you doing?"

I curse and knock over the mop bucket. Draven and I watch the carpet soak up the water. Then our eyes meet. Though expressionless, I swear I taste his disappointment, as well as smoke. Where has he been that was smoking? Didn't have anything to do with me this time. Someone is stealing my gig.

"The... the water was clean. I hadn't started because, uh, because your room was already... clean." I am going to bite off my tongue and feed it to the stray dogs because that is the only way it'll ever be truly useful.

Draven steps further into his room. The door shuts behind him. My hands tighten on the mop.

"And why are you here to attempt cleaning my room?" He slips the jacket from his wide shoulders to fold and place on the dresser. Even his dirty laundry has to be pristine. What an overachieving wart.

I drop to the floor to desperately attempt drying the rug. I've got a rag that I scrub against the wet spot then twist the rag into the bucket.

A simple answer rests on the tip of my tongue, but nothing's ever simple with Draven. Though I came here to make up, now I'm wondering if we should. Perhaps this is best. We spend less and less time together and these feelings will disappear. Except moments like this have happened before and we're drawn back together like a set of annoying magnets that someone keeps losing then discovering under the couch and eagerly stashing them someplace else they won't forget, only to lose them again. This is a very specific example because I speak from life experience.

Once I realize I can't dry the carpet with a wet rag, I sigh and rise to my feet. "You've been gone a while and probably haven't had time to clean so I thought it'd be nice to do that for you."

"But you forgot that we have people who clean."

"Yep."

A soft sound erupts from Draven's throat that I would say was a chuckle except I didn't hear it that well. I raise my gaze to catch him resting a fist over his mouth as if to silence the noise.

"Why do you suddenly care about cleaning my room for me?" he asks, leaning against the dresser with his arms crossed.

"I..." His intense gaze makes it hard to speak. Why must he look at me like that? Or am I merely so taken that all he has to do is look at me in the simplest way and I'm a mess? Because, if that's true, I may as well take a long walk into a ravine to spare myself inevitable humiliation in the coming future.

"I thought it'd be... it'd be a good start to apologizing," I say. Every word got softer until I was whispering by the end.

Draven shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "What are you apologizing for?"

"You know what," I groan and grip my headband to hide my eyes. "In my lab when I snapped at you. I--the truth is, I don't really mind that you keep an eye on me. I just, um, it's hard to explain. I don't like being treated like a child and knowing you only do it out of obligation to His Grace."

My face burns so hot I realize that, in almost every aspect of my life, I'm seconds away from starting a fire or blowing something up. Perhaps I should have been the one born with red hair instead of Draven.

"I never meant to make you feel like a child," Draven says, causing me to risk my blush getting caught by peeking up at him. His gaze is lowered to the floor. "I really never meant that."

"Then why do you always get so frustrated and run after me like a toddler about to fall into a lake?"

"Because you're always getting yourself hurt," he answers so swiftly that I don't even think he realized he said it. He snaps his mouth shut like he revealed a grand secret, then sighs. "You're always blowing something up--"

"Not on purpose."

"That makes it worse." He turns away to tug his tie off, which looks great at every angle honestly. Slapping the tie on the dresser, he continues, "I swear every time I take my eyes off you, something happens, like that time you were shot--"

He stops himself. The air grows tense. Heavy with an unspoken rule that makes us both rigid. He almost brought up *The Unspeakable Incident* . One would think after three years, we'd have found a way to never bring it up, and yet, here we are... staring at each other, practically challenging one of us to finish the story.

Standing tall, Draven heaves a long breath. He faces me again, expression apathetic once more. "To clear things up simply, His Grace has never ordered me to keep an eye on you. The things you say I do out of obligation, watching over you, waking you up, reminding you to eat, I do that of my own volition," he says like he's telling me the weather and not basically admitting that, somewhere in the dark abyss of his conscious, he may actually care about me.

Isn't that what I've always wanted to hear? Confirmation that Draven has some semblance of feeling for me, whether it's what I secretly yearn for or not. But now that I hear it, I'm terrified. Petrified by what it may cause within me; hope for something that'll never be. Not just because Draven has the pick of whomever he wishes, but also my... condition. Even if I want to cross this room right now and kiss him, I'd be scrubbing my lips raw a moment later.

"That's... it's... it's late. You've been really busy so you should rest. Sorry about the rug." I grab the bucket, almost spilling it a second time on the way to the door. If Draven's disappointed by my reaction, he doesn't show it.

"I'm glad you're finally back," I add. Now the words won't stop spilling out of my mouth, "But every once in a while you should tell His Grace to ask someone else for help. He relies on you so much that you hardly have any time for yourself."

"Is that another attempt to get more work by His Grace's side?"

I don't blame him for asking, but the question still makes my heart clench.

"No. I just want you to take some time for yourself." I leave without hearing his response. I probably wouldn't have heard even if I stayed because my heart's beating so loudly, a lot like it did three years ago...

Cyan and Draven have made up! I think? lol And we got a hint into their past; something about Cyan getting shot. What else do you

suppose happened? Draven made a pretty big admission, but is it a sign of romantic feelings or just friendship~

40. The Unspeakable Incident

Three Years Ago

Cyan P.O.V.

This was it; my moment to shine. Lore would see that I'm worthy of his trust and, after this weekend, I wouldn't have to go on another mission with Draven ever again!

"Why are you making such a weird pose?" Draven asked while staring incredulously at my... weird pose, I admit. But it was out of excitement!

"Don't you understand what this weekend means?" I followed Draven to the car where he carefully and quietly put two small bags in the trunk. I didn't even recall packing--that fucker packed a bag for me, didn't he?

"Did you go through my underwear drawer?" I snapped, flushing at the thought of Draven seeing said underwear drawer.

"I had to unless I wanted to be stuck around your stench all weekend," he replied and slammed the trunk shut. "You forgot to pack and I didn't feel like waiting."

He strutted by me like he didn't admit to breaking into my room, even if it was to help both of us. I hated wearing dirty underwear. Hated dirt and grime in general. As a child, I was surrounded by it. Filth upon filth, both in the literal and metaphorical sense. As an adult, I can't stand the thought of it, let alone living in it.

"I don't smell. You're such a dramatic bitch," I grumbled while getting into the car. There was no point even trying to argue about who should drive with Draven. He wouldn't argue and I wouldn't win.

"I don't want to hear that from you, the very definition of a dramatic bitch."

"That would hurt my feelings if I wasn't so preoccupied by the fact that you actually said bitch. Do you need some soap to wash that filthy mouth of yours?"

Draven started the car while donning the usual apathetic expression that didn't lessen his unfairly attractive features. It's a vampire thing; flawless skin, bright eyes, youthful appearance, and muscles they didn't have to work for. Draven more so than others, although I suppose I had always been very biased. Ever since the day I arrived at Seymour Manor, my eyes were on Draven. Not for the same reasons they are now, but still drawn.

He was always composed. Always prepared. Always had the trust of Lore, Arline, and the children, even if he didn't always pay them as much attention. Then I got older and added, "always effortlessly handsome and beautiful all at once" to the list of admiration. He made me short of breath when I thought I'd never feel such feelings again. And truthfully, I'd kill to have his height and shoulders. He doesn't deserve them, freaking ungrateful sack of rotten potatoes--

"You're staring," he said, keeping his orange eyes firmly planted on the road. "And you never finished what you were saying."

"Huh?"

"Earlier. What does this weekend mean?"

"Ah, right. If things go well, which they will--"

"With you involved, that's debatable."

"We won't have to go on missions together anymore. I'll be a lone wolf and Lore will finally see the truth--" I pointed accusingly at Draven, who didn't so much as blink in mild trepidation. "That I'm a far better choice of a right hand man than you are!"

"I see."

" *I see?* Give me more than that. Tell me you're going to do your best to keep your position or that'll only happen in my dreams!"

"Childish responses are part of your repertoire, not mine."

"Childish responses," I grumbled, incapable of denying that since it's a fact. Draven never made me feel better about it either. He happily pointed out my faults like it was a damn occupation and he's striving for employee of the year.

Why? Why me? What did he have against me? I have always been the one getting picked on.

"Whatever, my point is, after this weekend I'll be of more use to His Grace and... and it's something to celebrate. Even you should understand that and at least pretend to be happy for me," I added. All he did was hum in response. I glared at him. "Are you sure you have a heart? Because I swear you have about as much emotion as a cement block."

"I wouldn't be alive without one."

"You have about as much humor as cement too."

"I understand and appreciate comedy. You simply aren't funny."

This was going to be such a long weekend and an even worse drive. Draven hardly ever talked, let alone played any games with me. When I attempted to play I Spy, he politely reminded me that he was driving by saying; *"Do you want us to crash? Because you are more likely to die than I am."*

He never wanted to have any fun! Why did Lore keep him around? Lore always had a sense of humor. Maybe he got a kick out of trying to crack Draven's shell. Who knew.

After hours of torture, we arrived at our destination; a hotel in a rowdy city outside of Silra. We had to be extra careful not to get caught seeing as this wasn't Lore's territory. However, dhampir children had been dying for months. Their bodies turned up brutally beaten. Lore had enough of the

neighboring state doing nothing about the deaths. He sent Draven and I to stakeout the city that seemed to be at the center of all the dump sites.

The easiest way to play our parts were as businessmen visiting the city in search of a store to expand our horizons. We rented a room at a hotel and spent our days traversing the streets watching for dhampir children and anyone paying a little too much attention to them. There was nothing unusual about that particular job, but some moments were tough for me. Walking a busy city street meant getting bumped into time and time again. I resisted the urge to scratch until that evening when I returned to our hotel room. Sometimes we took shifts. I searched during the day and Draven at night.

Draven noticed my behavior right away.

"Cyan," he spoke my name that never made sense. My eyes were fucking green. "Your arm," he finished and nodded to where my nails continuously scratched. "Don't hurt yourself."

Times like that, when I couldn't tell if he sounded or acted concerned, made my breath hitch a little. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to care or not, but I guess it didn't matter anymore. After this job, we'd spend less time together and likely only see one another when eating at the estate. If that. Draven disappeared regularly, sometimes even for weeks on end. And I might too, once we finished this job.

I gripped my arm rather than tear it apart, then joined him at the window where we both peered into the growing darkness.

"Look there." Draven nodded out the window. "That man in the black coat and silver tipped shoes."

Such a strange and specific detail, but Draven had always been like that. One glance and he could pick someone out in a crowd.

"I've seen him everyday on my protol. He lingers around alley's, particularly those where homeless dhampir live."

"His Grace suspected this could have been an act by a group, but do you think it's only him?" I asked.

"We can't be for certain until--"

"Until he grabs another child that we happen to witness?" I intervened. Neither of us had brought up the truth that we knew we were waiting for. In order to catch this perp, we'd have to let him strike again to discover if there were others involved or not.

"I hate this," I hissed, thinking of a similar job almost two years back. It was one of my first. Draven and I didn't get there in time. A teenage boy died. A dhampir only four years younger than me murdered like others before him simply because of who he was. It was rough.

"We won't make the same mistakes," he reassured me. I couldn't help but notice how he put emphasis on the word *we* , as if to remind me that he, too, messed up. It made me smile for a moment.

Tensions remained at an all time high. Neither of us wanted a repeat of last time and that was why I made a mistake.

After almost two weeks of searching, I was heading back to the hotel when I saw him. The man in a black coat with silver tipped shoes carrying a homeless dhampir child that Draven and I spoke to on a few occasions. She breathed slowly as if she were resting, but beneath her long blonde hair I saw the remnants of a harsh bruise along her temple.

The rule always was that we wouldn't go after him alone. We didn't know what he was capable of or if there were others involved, but I saw her like that and remembered the previous boy's cold, dead eyes staring up at me. Accusing me. Screaming at me for not saving him soon enough.

I ran towards the bastard faster than I ever have. He heard me coming, the constant thud of my shoes against stone. He spun around. I had my hands up, a spell passing my lips to ensnare him. But he pointed a gun at me. One I hadn't seen in time. One I *should* have seen coming. I managed to conjure half a shield.

Bang!

He shot under the shield. The bullet pierced my thigh. I dropped, howling more from rage than pain.

"Get back here, you bastard! Put her down, put her the fuck down!" I screamed, shouting a spell even if my body already felt limp. A gold whip erupted from my fingertips, shooting across the alley to narrowly miss him running around the corner.

Healing spells had never been my forte, but I attempted one nonetheless. Rushed and messy, I managed to at least seal up the wound. The shot was clean, went straight through my leg. The bullet lay somewhere nearby or lodged into a wall. I didn't care. I had to get up. Had to go after her. He was going to kill her!

"Cyan!" Draven called. He came to a skidding halt beside me, gripping my shoulder hard. I wasn't sure where he came from, could only assume he heard the shot from our hotel only a block away.

"The man, the one with the silver tipped shoes, he has her! We have to go, we have to--argh!" I dropped when I tried to stand.

"You went after him without me?" Draven gaped. His eyes narrowed dangerously. "You know the rule. We go together--"

"Fuck the rule! He had her right in front of me! Why are we still here?!" When I tried to stand again, Draven pulled me up. I whimpered when he rested me against the wall. I hadn't even noticed his touch, one that would normally make me itch.

"Go back to the hotel," he ordered sternly.

"You're not going alone. I can he--"

"Go back to the fucking hotel, Cyan!"

I never heard him raise his voice like that. Never saw that sort of panic on his face. He didn't say another word. He didn't have to. I knew he wouldn't

let me go even if I tried, so I watched helplessly as Draven went off to find the perp alone.

I managed to vacate the alley before officers arrived. We couldn't risk being discovered. After making it back to the hotel, I sat on the floor tending to my wound in labored silence. Worry settled in my gut, then came the fear and the disappointment. What I had done was wrong, a terrible idea out of desperation. If Draven didn't get there in time, it'd be all my fault.

Hours passed before Draven returned carrying the blonde girl. I jumped to my feet until he gave me a look. She was asleep, wrapped comfortably in a blanket that he either bought or stole. I didn't care, so long as I could sit on the bed across from where she slept. Draven carefully tucked her in, which Lore had to have taught him because he's terrible with kids. It's why he rarely hung around any of us at the estate.

"She's alright?" I whispered.

"Considering what happened, yes," Draven replied. "She's malnourished, dehydrated, frightened, and exhausted. I've already informed His Grace concerning the circumstances around the children here. He's looking into ways to care for them and possibly bring them to an orphanage in Silra."

"Good, good. And what about the man?"

"Dead. He shot at me." Draven stuck his finger through two holes in his jacket where he had already healed completely. How lucky of him. My leg was still throbbing.

Speaking of my leg, Draven suddenly approached me. I froze when he knelt in front of me, trying to inspect my wound without touching my leg. I actually think I'd prefer him to just grab my thigh then gently ghost his fingers over it.

"What you did was foolish," he spat. "And if you think I'm not informing His Grace about this--"

"Are you seriously going to hold that over my head considering what happened?" I growled. We both glanced at the girl when she hummed in her sleep. She settled quickly.

Draven rose from the floor to head for the balcony. I limped after him, which he didn't approve of based on his narrowed glare. Fuck him though. I did what I wanted. My wound was fine, just a bit sore.

"If you're going to be doing missions alone, we can't have you making these kinds of mistakes. Had I not been here, she would have--"

"I know what would have happened," I snarled, feeling the rage wash over me in violent waves. "I get I made a mistake. It won't happen again."

"How are you so sure? What if it does and I'm not there?"

"Then any deaths will be on my hands."

Draven guffawed. He ruffled his hair until it stuck up at odd ends, and he still looked good. Really unfair.

"How are you this dense?" He rested a hand on his face, then dropped it. "This isn't only about her. What about you?" He jabbed me in the chest. "What if he hadn't missed? You may be a mage, but you are not like me or His Grace. A well timed shot to the heart and you're dead. Stop acting like you're fucking invincible."

"I don't do that."

"Yes you do, all the time. You shout and scream and throw out spells thinking you'll win out of sheer spite, but you won't. You can die so easily. Imagine how His Grace would feel if you were to die on a mission."

I shoved Draven hard enough for his back to hit the balcony.

"Don't try to guilt trip me like that, you heartless harpie!" I flushed at my own insult that made Draven raise an elegant brow. I didn't get why that hurt so much. A voice in the back of my head tried to supply an answer; I was angry Draven didn't mention how *he'd* feel if I died.

"You... you're such a... why do you always have to make me feel like shit?" I hissed, stumbling towards Draven. He held out his hands as if to help me should I fall, but I smacked them away. "Don't fucking touch me. Don't act like you give a single shit about me. I bet you would have been happy if he got me back there."

"Cya--"

"You'd be done with your babysitting job for good and no one would relentlessly bug you. You wouldn't have to wake me up or remind me to eat because Lore would get upset with you otherwise. I'm an obligation that you wish would have died in that alley back there. You don't need to try and make yourself seem like you care by bringing up Lore's feelings."

Draven grabbed my hand. "I'm not--"

"Stop, stop, stop it!" I ripped my hand away, rubbing it so ferociously I already felt the skin peeling off. The sound of sniffling made me realize I was crying. How pathetic. I must have looked like such a loser to him.

Rather than let him belittle me even more, I went to step inside, but my leg gave out. I stumbled on the small balcony, almost sending myself over the edge. Draven grabbed me so fast that he slipped too. We tripped over each other's feet to fall onto the hotel room floor where *The Unspeakable Incident* occurred.

Draven's lips met mine, more like punched considering that we fell pretty hard. I fell in a much more metaphorical way. My first kiss was taken by the guy who irritated me above everyone else and who also made me want a sense of romance. His hands were warm. A lot warmer than I thought they'd be; one resting behind my head and the other holding my arm. My hands froze somewhere on his waist, unsure if they wanted to grab him or push him away. For a brief moment, seriously like a second, my eyes fluttered closed. I basked in the warm sensation of Draven's lips against mine and wondered what he'd do if I tried for more...

Draven retreated. I heard his sharp intake of breath. My eyes fluttered open, met by the deep orange like flames in a fire pit. I wanted to kiss him again. I

really did. I almost did. But then came the itching. The fear. The panic. The disgust. The memories of mom and her patrons, the wicked grin of a man dragging me away, the touch of hands against my chilled skin and the smell of smoke, all of it came tumbling back. Hitting me over and over, like that bullet earlier, only even more painful. Unlike the bullet, this pain didn't pass right through me. It settled into my very bones, tearing away at muscles and nerves. I had the sudden urge to scream, as if someone had set me ablaze.

I shoved Draven off me so hard he hit his head on the bedside table.

"I'm sorry, Cyan, don't--"

I slammed the bathroom door shut and locked it. I didn't hear Draven outside over my own labored breaths. Panic attacks weren't uncommon. I knew how to get through them, but that time was worse because everything hit me at once. The confusion of wishing that moment could have lasted longer and the disgust of it ever happening at all. I couldn't breathe. I almost didn't want to. I almost wish I would have died in the tub where I curled up and clawed at my skin until the once white porcelain turned red.

Draven never brought up what we said that night or what happened. Neither did I. It became known as *The Unspeakable Incident.* One I wish I didn't remember so vividly, especially in the wee hours of the morning after waking from a dream where Draven kissed me again. Maybe more. Maybe a lot more. I'd stay awake as confused as ever, knowing I was the only one who felt that way.

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And there we have it *The Unspeakable Incident* was, in fact, an accidental kiss between Cyan and Draven. Is that super cliche? Yep. Do I care? No. I WILL RATHER DIE THAN GIVE UP THE CHEESE! Anywho, what did you think of our boy's accidental moment? ;D

41. Dejection & Hope

Present

Cyan P.O.V.

I never expected my apology to work so swimmingly. Or maybe it was an utter failure depending on how I truly feel when Draven wakes me the next day.

"You'll miss breakfast if you sleep in much longer," he says, leaning over my bed to speak softly into my ear, seeing as grabbing me while I sleep resulted in a nut shot once. One that I think he holds against me to this day. Not that I blame him. I have an excellent right hook.

"Oh, okay, thanks." I bury my face in my pillow, not to continue sleeping although I would love to pass right back out, but to hide my blush.

Draven retreats, revealing the usual cup of water on my bed and a warm towel in case I scratched myself at night. Sometimes a nightmare makes me do it. Once Draven woke me to find blood in my bed from tearing my arms open after a particularly bad memory. Since then, he always brought a warm towel. See? A damn perfectionist. A borderline maddening... guy.

Be steady heart. Learn to lower your standards.

Everyone attends breakfast, including Lore, Seren, and Draven. Since they recently finished a job, I guess they're taking a bit of a break. I overhear Seren telling Lore that he'll be heading into town, probably in an attempt to make us believe he's researching for the Red Moon Group. Draven makes no mention of work though. That's good. He can rest today. He's always overworking himself, which proves there's nothing perfect about being a perfectionist!

Although I could use some of the perfectionism in the lab. After breakfast, I try to get some work done, but I keep remembering Draven's breath against

my ear. The morning light coming in through the curtains to cast fire in his vibrant eyes. The slight parting of his lips that I know are soft and inviting and--

BANG!

I drop an entire glass of acid that, thankfully, does not land on my feet. That would have been bad and this is a clue that I am done for the day. The last thing I need are a few severe burns, a possible loss of limb and/or an explosion. Draven may come running in to lecture me while I wonder if he'd be so composed should I grab him by the shoulders and make out with him. I shouldn't have apologized. This infatuation is getting worse. I'm either about to reach the point of no return or I'm so far past it that I've hit the stage of denial.

Leaving the lab behind, I head out into the yard where the kids play before lunch. I can't believe I didn't cause an explosion between breakfast and lunch with the way my brain's functioning today.

Arline sits on the edge of the fountain, watching the children. When she sees me, she smiles and waves me over. Sighing dramatically, I plop down beside her.

"I'm surprised to see you out of your cave without being evicted by flames and smoke," she taunts.

"I was evicted by acid this time." Her eyes widen until I add, "No damage was done. To me. The floor will need a little work."

"You're a catastrophe."

"I know." Groaning, I run my fingers through my hair. "I apologized to Draven last night. We made up. He even woke me up this morning like nothing happened."

"I'd say that's great, but you almost turned yourself into a pile of goo. What's the problem?"

"That we made up."

"Explain for normal people to understand, please."

"It's funny that you think I even begin to understand how I feel and therefore can explain it to you." I grin at her intense eye roll.

"True," she says, eying me suspiciously. "This has to do with your unspoken thing that you're going to claim isn't an unspoken thing although we both know it's definitely an unspoken thing, huh?"

I rather not reply since, like she said, the unspoken thing exists in her mind. Only her mind because Draven and I... well, it's my problem. Not his.

"I'm going to be cheesy and demand that you tell him how you feel," she says, cackling before I even hiss at her.

"Bitch, are you fucking insane?" I raise my hand to silence her. "Don't answer that. I know the answer is yes and I ain't telling him shit. There's nothing. There never will be. And let's just say, because I know you're going to try this, let's say he does like me back, what then?"

I glare at the trembling hands in my lap. My fingers tug at the hem of my long sleeves that I've grown so accustomed to that I can wear a full black outfit on the beach and not break a sweat.

"I'm not capable of... the physical aspects of a relationship. Maybe one day. *Hopefully* one day, but how could I have a monogamous relationship where I have to ask someone to avoid all physical contact until I get over my shit?"

Arline rests her hand on my arm, gauging my reaction, which is enough to remind me that this isn't normal. That I'm still not okay after all these years.

She holds tight for a moment, head lowered like she's trying to keep something back. Then she sighs and looks at me, a tenderness to her eyes and her voice, "You're not undateable or unlovable because of this, Cyan. You deserve a relationship, if that is what you want, and if you want that

relationship to be with Draven, then there is nothing wrong with giving it a try. He knows about you. He understands and, frankly, a good person would understand. A couple finds a way to work with each other. Stop selling yourself short when you deserve so much more than what you think."

I don't know about that. I don't feel like I deserve much of anything, save more equipment for my lab, but Lore worries I'll become so obsessed no one will ever see me again. Admittedly, that is a possibility. I tend to get lost in my work once I start.

Back to the issue at hand, rather than responding to Arline's kind but equally troubling words, I remind her, "It doesn't matter either way. Draven has no feelings for me, not like that."

Arline throws her head back in a powerful laugh that makes her snort. Turning her head, she spots the very man we've been talking about stepping out of the main house to head for the music hall.

"Draven!" She calls and waves her hand, beckoning him over.

"What are you doing?" I hiss. She doesn't answer and Draven's by us in a moment.

"Do you need something?" he asks.

"Must I need something in order to talk to you?" She argues, then laughs and pats my back. "Okay, so actually I wanted to reveal a very interesting piece of news."

Draven doesn't appear interested on the outside, but the fact that he stays and listens shows he's interested enough to hear her out.

"A very hot vampire flirted with Cyan at the bookstore the other day," she says and nearly finds herself drowned in the fountain for the fucking audacity! Why would she say that?!

I look frantically between Arline's teasing smile and Draven's blank expression. She continues eagerly, "Even our little Cyan here was flirting

back a bit. He may yet find himself with his first ever boyfriend, wouldn't that be great?"

Quiet for a moment, Draven peers at Arline then me. His expression is as devoid of emotion as ever, more difficult to read than an ancient language never seen.

"That would be great. I hope things work out for you," he says.

I'd have preferred he stabbed me in the chest and ripped my heart out to serve up to the Gods. I'd be able to catch my breath easier.

"Is this all you wanted to speak to me about?" Draven inquires. "I've agreed to help clean the Music Hall--"

"Why?" I interject, startling Arline and Draven enough to both jump. "You just got back after running around for His Grace. Take the day off. Go read a book about how to be the perfect butler and make some notes to send to the author because I'm sure they aren't as good as you."

Draven stares incredulously at me, then tentatively says, "I'm not going to neglect my duties--"

"You're neglecting your duties towards yourself!" I used the word your too much in that sentence and it almost frustrates me as much as this situation.

Draven doesn't say more. He pivots on his heel and leaves, which shouldn't surprise me. Sometimes Draven leaves mid conversation if you're annoying enough. I would know from endless experience.

"See? I told you he doesn't care," I mumble while wishing my feelings would leave alongside him.

Having him wish me luck, I never imagined it'd hurt as much as it did. I want him to take it back and promise to never say it again.

"Doesn't care?" Arline repeats, eyebrow raised. Then her smile grows wicked. "Trust me, he cares. He cares a lot."

I don't get how she has the confidence to say that, but then the day progresses and...

"Ouch!" Bernadette grunts when she runs into me in the hall. She's a maid who has been working here for almost five years. She peers up at me apologetically. "Oh dear, Cyan, I'm so sorry! I wasn't watching where I was going. Sorry."

"It's alright." I chuckle while helping her pick up some clean linen. She rushes to stuff them all in her arms, glancing nervously behind her.

"What's with that look?" I ask, grinning at her flushed face. "You're acting like something is chasing you."

"There might as well be," she claims, then gestures for me to lean in to hear a secret. "It's Draven. He has been acting strange almost all day. It happened right around lunch time, actually!"

That's right after we talked...

"He's unusually annoyed. You know he never shows anything." She waves her hand in front of her face. "But something's off. He's huffing and mumbling to himself. I began to think he hurt his head, but when I asked he glared at me so fiercely I ran." She shivers. "You best stay away from him today. I know I will be."

"I'm sure he's just tired from all the work he has been doing," I reassure her although deep down, very deep, astronomically deep in fact, I wonder if he is a little jealous after all. Could he be? Really?

Bernadette and I jump when a loud bang echoes from down the hall. She looks nervously at me. "That came from where I just left Draven."

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Ohoho, so Draven and Cyan are talking again, but Cyan kinda regrets it because of his overwhelming feelings. Arline truly believes Draven

likes Cyan too. Did she successfully make Draven jealous or could there be something else on his mind?

42. His Compliments

Cyan P.O.V.

"I'll go check on him," I say to Bernadette. Nodding, she hugs her linens like they're a life line and saunters off.

I head towards the lounge she told me Draven was in. Pushing open the door, I find him actually glaring at a broken globe on the floor. It's like he's reprimanding the globe with his eyes. How dare it have the audacity of falling off the shelf on its own?! As if he'd admit to knocking it off himself.

My snicker garners his attention. The glare disappears, replaced by his infamous emotionless facade. He's wasted as a butler. He'd make for an example assassin or even a professional gambler. There may not be a better poker face in existence. He'd win every match and live a life of luxury surrounded by beautiful people who can't tell if he wants them around or needs to take a shit.

"This is unlike you," I claim, stepping over to observe the damage. "Making a mistake. Could it be that your old age is catching up to you?"

"I'm incredibly young in vampire years," he says, like I actually need to be reminded.

"I'm teasing."

Maybe not my best idea considering Bernadette claimed he has been in a mood. Draven's hard enough to joke with when he's mild tempered, let alone legitimately upset, which is a rare occurrence.

"If His Grace finds out you broke a likely very expensive globe, you may lose your spot as number one," I continue to tease until he frowns. "That was another joke," I add because I hate that look on his face.

"Hn."

That's Draven speech for *"whatever."*

We finally made up and here I am possibly pissing him off again. Although I've been debating on whether I should do that anyway. But no matter how much my mind battles itself over what to do, I find myself here. Talking to him. Apologizing. Hoping for an ounce of his attention while also wishing I never got a moment of it.

Sighing, I move over to help clean up as a poor apology. When I grab one of the broken metal rods from the globe, another hand touches mine. I raise my gaze to meet Draven's, realizing we both moved in to clean at the same time.

Darika was squealing about a moment like this in one of the cheesy romance books she reads. I caught her blushing like a madwoman in the library. It took a few seconds to get her to admit to the pervy book she was reading. Why the hell am I having a moment from a pervy book?

"Sorry!" I throw myself across the room to get away from him and the growing sensation to scratch my hand. I continuously clench and unclench my hand, hoping keeping it busy will ease the need. "My bad," I repeat. "About teasing you."

"I'm accustomed to the treatment." Draven slowly picks the pieces up one by one. I watch like some fucking peeper with a voyerism issue.

I should go. Run off to the lab or bury myself in my room to never be seen again, but I never do what I should.

"Arline was messing around earlier," I mumble.

Draven cradles the broken pieces of the globe in a cloth. He stands to watch me with that familiar cold gaze, but something about it puts me on edge. My toes curl. Breath hitches. He hasn't done a damn thing and he has made me breathless. There's an intensity to his gaze I can't explain and I don't try to.

"She lied about someone flirting with you?" he asks, pivoting on his heel to set the broken pieces on an end table. "Why would she do that?"

"Uh, no, I... it wasn't a total lie. There was a guy, but nothing will ever happen. She was exaggerating, messing with us to get a reaction, I guess." I shrug and cross my arms. My feet wish to run. My heart yearns to stay because it's a fucking sadist.

"Are you sure she was exaggerating?" Draven argues. He kneels by the remaining broken pieces, picking them up bit by bit. "If he approached you, he must have been interested."

"That doesn't matter. You know I can't..." I roll my shoulders and crack my neck as if that'll rid me of a past that affects everything in my future.

"Putting yourself down like that isn't good for you," he says, puzzling me. Draven and comforting aren't often in the same sentence unless it's, *Draven is incapable of being comforting* . But then he does the fucking unthinkable and proves me very, very wrong.

"You're beautiful, charming, and funny, albeit chaotic. Anyone would be lucky to be with you, and if they truly cared they would help you through tough times," he says like he's recounting the damn weather.

He stands once more to face me. I wish he wouldn't, if only to spare myself the embarrassment of knowing he has seen the expression I'm making. I feel the heat rising with the desire to burst. Every piece of me flushes because of a few words from someone who speaks them so calmly like he's reciting the alphabet.

"You shouldn't expect everyone to disregard you so easily because of your trauma and understand that those who do are not worthy of you to begin with," he finishes while putting all the broken pieces in a rag. He twists it tight and heads for the door. "Good luck with your bookstore friend."

Should I believe there was an ounce of jealousy in how he said *friend* ? Should I really care about that or...

I grip my arms until they ache.

He called me charming and funny and... beautiful.

I used to hate that. *Beautiful, pretty, cute, handsome* , because of my round eyes, short height and bright hair. All of it caught other's attention. Rarely ever in a good way. My parents didn't have friends worthy of trust. They came and went from the house, a few often paying a little too much attention to their *adorable son who looked like a little girl* or *had such beautiful eyes* . They played with my hair when I told them no, grabbed my hands, made me sit on their laps and I knew--I knew something was wrong about how they acted, how they looked at me, and what they said.

But right now, the compliment that once made my skin crawl now makes my heart race until I feel the beat in the tip of my toes.

"Draven!" I call before even realizing I ran into the hall.

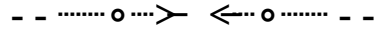
He stops, turning on his heel to face me.

"Do... do you really think I'm beautiful?"

"Of course," he replies around a rare, coy smirk. "Should I look into replacing the mirror in your bathroom?"

I don't know how to respond to that. Draven doesn't seem to care if I do. He walks away, leaving me physically speechless but mentally incapable of shutting up. My mind fires off what happened earlier over and over, repeating his calm remarks and wondering if there was a certain lilt to his voice to signal that he cares more than he lets on. Or should the fact he said anything proves he cares? I'm scared to hope so and scared not to hope at all.

"You unfair bastard," I whisper, clutching my hand over a heart that refuses to stop singing.



Oop, we got a bit of a glimpse into Cyan's past. What do you suppose his childhood was like? And Draven called Cyan beautiful! What a rare compliment ;D Will these two ever talk about their *Unspoken Thing?* Do you want to know what Draven was thinking during all this? Check out the upcoming story branch!

43. The Maybe Not Jokes

Seren P.O.V.

After Ayden's case, my days take a sudden boring turn. Most days Lore is in his office or doing Lord-like work outside the manor. I'm not entirely sure what the aristocracy do. Even if one tried to explain their work, I likely wouldn't get, and I don't really want to. Seems to involve a lot of paperwork and pleasantries, neither of which are of interest.

I spend most of my days in search of the Red Moon group or sneaking around the manor that proves everyday that it hides no secrets. I've gotten more done on my fake investigation than the real one. The Red Moon group's symbol resides all over the city; drawn on sides of buildings, lamp posts, and backdoors. I've yet to determine if they're drawn by hooligans or a legitimate sign that the terrorist group is in town. There are marks like this all over the capital too so it isn't that unusual, but the signs here are new. I even found one where the paint was still wet. Either it's proof the Red Moon has actually taken up shop somewhere in Nosa or there are some kids wanting to rebel while not understanding what that means.

Through all that though, the vacation day I promised to give myself finally arrives. I wake up early to prepare for my date with the cute church boy, Jakoby. Days off always make me feel guilty, but I know I need them. Spending time with someone outside the manor will do me good. After getting ready, I knock on Lore's office door. I always inform him when I'm going out, in case he ever needs me to come back at a certain time for who knows what.

"Come in," he calls. "Seren, perfect timing."

"Did a case pop up?" I ask, shutting the door behind me.

"Nothing the precinct can't handle on their own. However, I've got a job to do that'll involve some traveling," he replies, rummaging through a few

papers. He stacks them up neatly. "One of my nellore factories in Vexsis has been having some trouble. I'll be leaving in a few days and will likely be there for about a week or two, depending on how long my work takes."

Nellore factory?! How in the Mothers name did he get his hands on a nellore site? The king himself doesn't even have one. The vampires covet them as they're a product only available in Vexsis. They won't even share how they use it to power their Warlords and airships. That's why you can always tell the difference between an airship coming from Vexsis vs one leaving from Earth. Theirs are state of the art, seemingly a thousand years ahead of us while ours tend to smell like smoke and are seconds away from losing an engine.

Here lies another opportunity though; one to see Lore among his own kind in his own world. I've never been to Vexsis, only gazed upon the Gateway hovering outside the capital like a looming threat. Only high members of the church are granted access and that happens rarely and must have good reasons. Olere went once. He claimed vampire guards surrounded him day and night. I've always had mixed feelings towards the idea of going, but now I know that I have to, if only to see Lore in another new environment.

"Could I come along?" I ask, not surprised to find Lore blink rapidly in obvious surprise. "The Red Moon group is made up primarily of vampires and dhampir. While I doubt I'll get any information there, that doesn't mean there isn't a slim possibility."

Lore taps a finger against his desk, hesitant to ask, "Are you certain you want to go? You'll be watched every moment, if I'm even able to get permission."

"I'd like to go, if you'd be so kind as to get that permission."

He doesn't look completely convinced, but inevitably gives in. "Alright. I'll make a few calls and see what I can do. Was there something you wanted to say?"

"Right, I'll be heading into town again today. If you need me, you'll have to send Draven to come find me."

"Why?" Lore eyes me suspiciously, leaning over his desk in a skeptical manner. "You aren't going to visit the precinct?"

I should have considered my words more carefully or even lied about them. Lore has an uncanny ability to sense bullshit, likely because he spews it so often. A shit talker must recognize shit talking.

"I've got personal business to attend to," I claim.

"Personal business," Lore echoes. He stands and rounds the desk to lean against the front. His eyes scan me over, making this already tense situation worse. His gaze is like hot iron prodding against my sensitive skin that cracks under the pressure. Heat pours through my veins, speaking of the unspeakable.

"Ah, so it's a date?" He laughs.

I bite my tongue that does nothing to quell Lore's suspicions.

"I should have known you would be a player," Lore remarks. He presses a hand gently over his fake aching heart. Jutting out his bottom lip, he pretends to cry. "Here I thought we had something special. I'm wounded!"

"Oh, we have something special, but it's the worst kind of special," I reply. Pivoting on my heel, I head for the door, but never make it.

"What's their name?" Lore whispers against my ear. His hand grasps my wrist, fingers trying to move up my palm. I smack his hand away and knock his chin with my shoulder for daring to get so close.

"That's none of your concern."

"Isn't it? I'd like to know who I'm up against."

"Your jokes are getting incredibly tiring." Just like this close proximity is. Each of his breaths I feel against my neck. The goosebumps rising there have little to do with the threat of a dhampir's bite and more to do with Lore himself. His touch and his breath and the sound of his voice warming my ear--

He steps in front of me, resting his hand under my chin to force me to meet the chilled blue of his eyes. "Who said they're jokes?"

"Almost everything you say to me is a joke."

"Almost," he repeats.

"Don't you have a few calls to make?" I swiftly move around him before those ocean eyes of his drown me. At the door, I turn to point accusingly at him. "And don't send Draven after me for nonsense as an excuse to ruin my date."

Lore grins maddly. "So you admit it's a date?"

"Urgh!" I throw my hands up, defeated, then leave. The slamming of the door behind me can't block out his amused chuckles that shouldn't make my lips twitch back into a smile.

He's toying with me. It's his favorite pastime. A way to seek revenge on the church for sending me to begin with. I can't fathom how he finds this so amusing. I know he's twisted, in that sense, but perhaps not enough to commit murder... well, he did kill Ikehn, but that was self defense.

"Enough, enough," I say while smacking my own face. "Don't think about him. I've got a date. A real date."

That I refuse to mess up by explaining, in great detail, how to tend to a severed limb or how it's much more difficult to behead a vampire than it seems. Dates never end well when those topics are brought up, which should be obvious, but here I am--the guy who struggles to have successful dates because of said topics.

I head into town on foot because I don't want to ask Lore if I can take one of the cars. Besides, walking will clear my head. Jakoby and I agreed to meet for an early lunch at a local restaurant that he claims is a must try.

When I arrive, Jakoby's already there. He sits at one of the tables finnicking with the napkin. He gazes out the window, searching and paying little

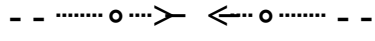
attention to the waitress who brings his drink. She goes to sit the drink down at the same moment he grabs a bread roll. Their hands hit and the drink goes all over the table.

"Oh Mothers, I'm so sorry!" Jakoby exclaims, blushing up to his ears.

"It's alright," the waitress laughs. Jakoby sits anxiously while trying to convince the waitress to let him help. But then he sees me approaching and almost sends the entire table to the floor by standing up so fast. I manage to grab the table and keep it in place.

"H-Hi," he says around a nervous laugh.

"Hey." I offer a smile that makes his blush almost dangerous to look upon.



I'd say the date has gone far better than expected seeing as I'm laying in bed with Jakoby later in the evening. However, laying may not be the correct word. Our clothes lay forgotten, scattered across the room. Our bodies press together beneath the rumpled sheets. I mark his neck hungrily, taking the skin between my teeth until his deep moan reverberates against my ear. It has been a while and I may be more eager than expected, but Jakoby doesn't seem to mind. He responds in kind, thrusting his hips against mine or clinging to my arms when something feels too good.

"You know, I--" Jakoby moans when I nibble at his bottom lip. "I d-don't do this often."

"Me either." I kiss him hard while running my hand across his trembling thigh. "My dates usually end in failure."

Jakoby snorts. "Yeah, right."

I retreat to rest my elbows on either side of him. His fingers twist into my hair.

"You don't believe me?" I ask while wearing nothing but a playful glare.

He shakes his head, biting at his bottom lip that's begging to be kissed. So I do just that a few more times, enjoying eliciting his adorable moans, before explaining, "I'm serious. I have a tendency to bring up unpleasant aspects of my job and that always ruins the mood so I'm--I'm really grateful for your *amazing* tour."

Jakoby laughs, then shivers when I bring my hips down roughly against his. His nails leave crescent shapes against my arms and back arches off the bed. He gasps into our kiss, running his hands across my arms to my back where he takes hold. I shiver and hope he doesn't ask about the scars that he no doubt felt. There are too many to count and they would, indeed, be a mood breaker if I explained.

"Dinner was also spectacular," I add, moving lower to kiss his collar bone, then his chest. "But I admit that I'm far more interested in dessert."

"Y-Yeah, me too." His moans grow louder when my lips proceed to mark his chest, inching closer and closer to his parted thighs.

I get the distinct feeling that we won't be leaving bed tonight. If anyone catches me returning at midnight or even early tomorrow morning, they'll have a field day. Especially Lore.

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Seren out here gettin' his groove on. Way to go boy, but also y'know you can't get Lore off your mind ;D Anyway, what do you think about Lore's so-called jokes? Will these rendezvous with Jakoby continue? What if Lore finds out~

Also, if you're unaware, He Who Will Be King is now in the paid program at Wattpad. If you can, please purchase it to show some support and obviously to read it lol I'd really appreciate it!

44. To Be Happy With Them

When I wake the next morning, Jakoby's snuggled into my arms. His back rests against my chest. I don't want to wake him and I don't want to leave yet. This has been a very much needed moment. A night spent with someone who doesn't stress me out, who lets me feel this sense of normalcy. Waking up in a warm embrace doesn't seem like it should be held at such high regard, but it is for me. I like this, holding someone, pressing a tender kiss to his shoulder, hearing him slowly wake up and looking back at me with a tired smile.

"Good morning," I whisper, pressing another kiss on Jakoby's neck.

"Morning," he says, somehow managing to blush even this early in the morning.

"You hungry?" I ask. My head rests against his shoulder.

He nods. "I could eat."

I kiss his arm because, apparently, I'm starved for physical attention. "I'll make breakfast."

Jakoby rolls onto his back to watch me get out of bed. I definitely catch him staring at my ass until I put some clothes on.

"You can cook?" He asks teasingly.

"I am a man of endless talents... albeit cooking is not one of them. I can do the basics so I assure you, you won't die."

Jakoby's laughter follows me into the kitchen. He lives in a small apartment not far from the church where we met. I do the dishes first seeing as we didn't get around to them last night. By the time I'm prepping breakfast, Jakoby waddles out of the bedroom in a warm robe. His arms snake around my waist, refusing to release me even as I move around the kitchen.

"Careful," I say, resting a hand on his. "I don't want any backsplash hitting you."

"Spoken like a true protector." Jakoby releases me only to stand at my side. I like it. A lot. Sometimes I wonder where I'd be now if things had gone differently. If my family survived, would I be living like this with a loving boyfriend or husband? Would we be waking up every morning to make each other breakfast? Maybe we'd be kissing our kids awake or getting them ready for school. They're sweet thoughts.

"Just so you know, I've possibly got some work coming up that'll send me away for a week or two," I say, causing Jakoby to frown. I'm not sure if it's messed up of me to like that he appears disappointed, but I do. Because maybe that means he wants to meet up again. Give this another go--this meaning hanging out, not necessarily more sex, although I certainly wouldn't say no.

"But, if you want, we can spend more time together before I leave and I'll call you as soon as I get back?" I suggest, staring at our breakfast rather than face him, in case the response is bad.

"O-Okay," he says, sounding a little breathless. He rests his forehead against my shoulder. "I'd like that."

He grabs my hand to interlock our fingers. We stand like this until I finish breakfast. We pray to the Mothers over our meal and talk about mundane things like our favorite color or an embarrassing childhood story. I'd have stayed longer if I didn't suspect that'd make going back to the manor even worse. I can't give them all even more ammunition.

After breakfast, we say our goodbyes.

"I'll call and let you know if I'm traveling or not," I tell Jakoby at the door.

"Okay, be careful," he says, leaning up for a kiss that has me wrapping my arms around his waist. He leans into the kiss that lasts long enough to leave us both breathless.

"Bye," I whisper against his lips.

"Bye," he echoes. He stands at the door to watch me leave. I wave one last time before taking the stairs to the first floor.

Unfortunately, the moment Jakoby's out of sight, I'm back to serious and somber thoughts.

By now, Lore might have already received an answer concerning whether I can follow him to Vexsis or not. Although I'm the one who asked to tag along, I'm beginning to regret that request. I've only heard stories about Vexsis, most of them not being very good. The realm itself is beautiful; Olere said the red moon actually made the world seem as if it were made of stained glass. During the day, the sun has an almost bluish tint that changes all the colors slightly. Flowers are an off yellow or pale pink that leaves one befuddled and amazed.

However, the vampires are even more cocky because they're on their home turf. They parade around in their Warlords like a silent threat to Earth; how their technology is far more advanced even after what they've shared with us. And mortals, those who were unfortunate enough to be left behind after the Vampire Wars and had families on Vexsis, none of them know the meaning of freedom. They're slaves, carrying their master's parasols or becoming a quick drink on a hot summer day. If they so much as raise their voice without permission, death may be their punishment. There's nothing any of us from Earth can do about it. Their rules are their own, just like ours.

Will I survive the journey? Though they're bound not to harm me, a well placed accident could happen.

The church couldn't possibly have hoped for this opportunity, would they? I didn't know of Lore owning a nellore mine, but the church likely did. They could have hoped Lore would have to visit and take me with him. Have another member of the church infiltrate Vexsis, even if it's for a short while, and tell them what I saw when I get back. Or I'm thinking way too much into this due to the nerves slowly building as I get closer and closer to the manor.

I adjust the collar of my robes, hoping I can make it to my room before one of the kids see. Don't want them asking about the *mosquito bites* on my neck.

Pushing open the doors, I poke my head inside to check for any sign of the children. I'm immediately met by Draven, who is about to walk by, but he stops dead in his tracks when spotting me. He scowls, of course.

"You're back," he states, sounding disinterested, but his sneer says he wishes I fell off a cliff. His eyes drift to my neck. "There better not be a stranger behind you that you expect to have a day of sexual escapades with."

"What? Why would I have brought him with me?" I bite my tongue when spotting Draven's devilish grin.

"I bet the two of you prayed together afterward, thanking the Mothers for whatever weird shit you got into," Draven says, then walks away like he didn't successfully bait me and humiliate me.

"We didn't pray!" I shout after him, blushing. "And there was nothing weird! You... urgh!"

Everyone here is the worst! I storm off to my room before there can be another incident.

While changing, laughter drifts in through the open window. The children squeal with such glee that the mirth becomes contagious. I smile too, leaning against the framework to find them frolicking among the yard. Lore's with them, dressed down because he wouldn't dare to dirty his precious suits by crawling through the yard after a shrieking Ashby and Oliver. Angel attempts to rally her brothers by waving a wooden sword and pointing the blade at Lore, who I'm guessing is pretending to be some kind of beast that she slays. He falls dramatically onto his side, feigning death. Even sticking his tongue out the side of his mouth like the drama queen he is.

To the side, Arline supervises Darika, who must have some sort of wind trait. She blasts gusts of air out of her hand at Isabella, who wears goggles as she holds out her arms like a superhero. Nalo, Hyun Woo, and Reegan watch in awe or possible envy. No doubt they'll bug their older sister for a ride next.

They're so... exceedingly ordinary in the wackiest way. A family no different than any other, except maybe happier than anyone could expect. They're an amalgamation of people from different places and different backgrounds, but they work. They're happy children who deserve even more and--and how could any of them grow up to be bad? Why do they have to? Why can't they...

"Seren!" Oliver's voice calls, returning my attention to him. He has spotted me and now stands on the side of the fountain, waving a hand wildly. "Seren, come play with us! We're-we're going to play hide and seek next!"

"Oh yes, do come play, Seren," Lore calls, reviving from the dead to wiggle his fingers in my direction. I'd scowl if the children weren't watching and would likely misunderstand my expression.

I hesitate to respond. A wave of worry consumes me, dragging me to depths of overwhelming concern and confusion. *You're not here to play* , a voice whispers in the dark. *You're not here to be their friend.* Another voice answers, something warm and sweet that I've long forgotten; *but why can't I be? Why can't I be happy--with them?*

"I'll be down in a minute," I call and head for the door.

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Whoa, there's a lot to unpack in this chapter. Seren's thinking a lot about family, not just what he wanted had things gone differently, but also Lore's current family. How do you feel about Seren's thoughts? Is he finally opening his eyes or is this going to send him into even worse thoughts?

45. The Fear of Letting Go

"I vote we play more knights and dragons first," Angel declares when I initially arrive. Grinning, she points her sword at me. "Seren should be the dragon this time. Papa will be the king and I'll be the knight who rescues him!"

Lore claps in exaggerated delight. "That sounds wonderful! Please save me from this terrible beast, Angel. Papa is so scared."

"I'll make sure the dragon never even looks at you again!" Angel shouts and pokes me roughly in the stomach with the tip of her blade. Her expression sours. "This is where you fight me, dragon."

"Oh... I thought we were voting first on what to play," I mumble, glancing awkwardly between the giggling children and Lore's sympathetic smile. I get the feeling he goes through the kids bouncing back and forth between ideas on the daily. This isn't what I'm used to so I don't really know what to do.

"Yeah, you promised we'd play hide and seek next!" Oliver juts out his bottom lip.

He shoots the dangerous expression at Lore, who immediately says, "That's right, we're playing hide and seek now."

I see Lore does have a weakness; his pouting children.

"Let's ask Seren to play knights and dragons another day, okay?" Lore smiles at Angel.

"Fine," Angel huffs, reluctantly slipping her sword into its sheath.

Lore claps to get the kids attention. "Come on, kiddo's, we promised Oliver we'd play hide and seek today."

Darika's concentration wavers. The gusts of wind erupting from her hands dissipate. Isabella howls with laughter when she drops right into Arline's outstretched arms. Darika smiles sheepishly even if her sister continues giggling deliriously after the drop. Once everyone's rounded up, we draw straws to determine who seeks and who hides. Reegan and Arline become the seekers while the rest of us sprint across the estate.

When was the last time I played hide and seek, or any form of childish game? We played at the orphanage, but once I began my training I... well, I trained. There was work to be done. Monsters to slay. Day in and day out I practiced with sword, dagger, bow, then an axe to find what I excelled at, what could keep me alive on the field.

I missed so much, didn't I?

"Ready or not, here we come!" Arline and Reegan call in unison.

Shit! I dive under a bush along the outskirts of the treeline. The vegetation's thick and will provide good cover, but apparently I'm not the only one who thought that.

"Damn it all, what are you doing?" I hiss when Lore comes rolling into my hiding place. "Go find your own spot."

"Come now, sharing is caring," he says, choosing to rest *on top* of me rather than to the side or even under another bush.

My breath catches when our hips make fast friends. My thighs cradle his waist. I feel his legs brush against mine. Then our chests meet and his long hair that, today of all days, isn't up in a ponytail or braid, drapes over his shoulders to tickle my cheeks. The shadows cut across his porcelain features, eerily perfect, and his eyes shimmer like waves under the blinding sun.

"This--this has nothing to do with sharing," I manage to hiss, though the frustration I attempt to push into my voice disappears by the time the words pass my lips. I sound almost desperate. For what? I'm afraid to learn the answer.

"This is your attempt to irritate me by cutting into my personal space. Again," I add, glowering at his wicked grin.

"How flattering to know that you've been observing me so passionately as to guess my true intentions," he says.

Leaves and grass beneath us crunch when he moves to rest his elbows on either side of my head, successfully trapping me. This is when paranoia, fear, and self preservation should kick in. All my years of training are meant to resurface and find a way to escape, but the haze of my mind grows too strong. Even more so when his hips move either to drive me mad or make himself more comfortable. Regardless, I grasp his hips like I think that'll steady us, but I don't push him away.

"Shouldn't you have found a place to hide inside?" I ask, holding my breath when his nose brushes mine.

Lore raises a curious brow.

"You're getting your clothes dirty out here. Aren't you too expensive for that?" I explain.

He chuckles. I feel that damn sound reverberating in his chest and my own because of the fact that we're practically glued together. Is the temperature rising? It's hotter than I remember out here.

"I've been playing with the children outside for hours. I'm already filthy," he says, eyes falling half mast in a manner that makes me question my resolve. "Although, I'm certainly not opposed to getting filthy with you sometime. I'm sure it'd be worth it."

"You're... vile."

Lore chuckles a second time, making me suck in a breath. The natural movement of his body makes our hips slide. Any more of this and he's definitely going to notice something I'd rather he not remark on, but my body won't listen. It won't move, at least not in the way I'm telling it to.

"Shouldn't you be the one more concerned in this situation?" Lore abruptly asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Won't your boyfriend get upset knowing you're in a rather compromising position with another man?"

"Boyfriend?" I repeat, feeling suddenly embarrassed. I try to turn away but Lore surrounds me. One squirming movement from me forces me to bite my lip to keep back a moan. Lore's grin widens and I want nothing more than to kis--smack it off his stupid face.

"We aren't boyfriends," I finish too breathlessly.

"Oh, so you're the bad boy type?" He reaches up to tug at the high collar of my undershirt, revealing the very kiss marks I was trying to hide. I shove his hand away with my shoulder.

"Please, as if someone as hot as you hasn't had a plethora of one night stands that may or may not turn into anything," I say, thinking I've made sense until Lore's vicious smile makes me struggle to swallow.

"Someone as hot as me," he repeats, making my cheeks burn.

"You misheard--"

"I certainly didn't," he interjects, leaning in so the heat of his breath sears my neck. My body shivers. I'd say it's from fear, but I can't even convince myself of that nonsense.

"Seren," he whispers and presses his body firmly against mine. My fingers dig into his hips--to pull him closer.

"I can hear you, Papa!" Reegan calls, forcing sense into the both of us.

Lore veers back. I release him and push away, crawling away from the scene of the crime.

"Found you!" Reegan shouts. "And you too, Seren! Come out!"

"Ah, I thought we found the perfect spot. You're too good at this, sweetie," Lore laughs like he wasn't turning my world upside down a mere moment ago. I hear him standing and the twigs crunching on his steps as he walks away.

"I don't know, I found you 'cause the two of you were talking." Reegan giggles. "Seren, are you coming?"

"Y-Yeah." I cough and push myself onto shaking legs. "I'm coming."

I fear turning around, so I keep my gaze low. I can't look at him, to face what almost happened, what I would have let happen. If Reegan hadn't come when she did, Lore would have... and I would have...

I press the back of my hand to my lips. I feel sick.

"Seren?" Reegan tugs on my sleeve. I look down at her, forcing a smile.

"Are you okay?" she asks tentatively. "You look... funny."

"Sick, I think she meant sick," Arline explains. She must be sticking close to Reegan during their search, to help her or make sure she doesn't wander off into the woods on her own.

"I'm fine. I think I'm just getting a little hungry since it's almost lunch time," I say, giving Reegan a reassuring nod.

She believes my lie and nods. "Okay, but you can still help search, yeah? Since I caught you, that means you help me find the others."

"Of course. I'll make sure to find every single one of them."

She holds up her hand, puzzling me momentarily until I give her the high five she requested. Then she heads off, marching proudly after having captured two of us. I follow after her, sensing Lore's presence a few steps behind. His gaze burns my neck. Feels as if his every thought is forming thin needles to pierce my skin, to further rile me up.

That's all this is, isn't it? His attempt to confuse, tempt, and ruin a paladin of the Holy Church. I'm a play thing and my reactions encourage him to do more. To push and prod until I'm teetering on the edge of a cliff, then when the time is right--he'll push.

I almost glance over my shoulder, naively hopeful to see similar confusion on his face, but I manage to refrain. This won't do. I can't do this. Should I...

Should I write to the church to request a new mission? What in the Mother's names am I meant to tell them though? That I'm--that the charms of a dhampir are too much to handle. That his every move tempts me more and more. I fear I'll lose myself.

No, no, I can't do this. I can't tell the church. My family. They're all I have left. I'm nothing without them. No one. Just... Seren. Alone without a home or any reason to live. I wouldn't be here without them. I'd have died without them. I owe them everything.

What will Olere think of me; a disappointment? A disgrace? A pathetic man incapable of controlling his base urges? Olere and everyone a part of the church will see me as a waste, as a failure unworthy of the title of paladin and especially unworthy of their affection. I'll lose them. Everyone. My family, gone. Again. Maybe that is to be my punishment for daring to think for even a moment that Lore... that we could--

Sometime during my trance, I've found someone. Ashby stares wide-eyed at me from his hiding place in the kitchen cupboards. He holds a shaking finger to his lips in a silent request. His dim red eyes once overcome by fear at the sight of me hold a childish glee and that's all it takes to make me smile. It both soothes and terrifies me.

"Not telling is cheating," I whisper and present my hand to him, surprised when he takes hold almost instantly. Pouting, he scurries out of the cupboard. I notice him wince.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I ask, looking him over with sudden worry. "Are you hurt?"

Ashby looks down at his ankle that's slightly red and swollen. "I tripped," he mutters, head lowered in dejection.

"Hey, that's okay. We all trip. I've fallen down more stairs than I could count," I say, grinning when that gets a soft chuckle from him. Should I heal him--a paladin of the Holy Church using divinity to heal a dhampir child, Lore might throw a fit or Ashby may not like it either.

"Do you mind if I pick you up? We can go see your Papa so he can look at that," I suggest to be safe.

Ashby thinks for a brief moment, worrying me that I might have put him on the spot, like he'll feel bad if he says no. I'm about to suggest I merely call for Lore since he's nearby, but then Ashby holds up his arms.

"Okay," he declares.

I don't know why that makes me hesitate. My hands shake when I pick him up, surprised by how light and small he is. He nestles into my side, circling one arm around my neck while his other hand grasps my shirt. He stares at me, tilting his head curiously when I haven't moved.

"Sorry, let's uh, let's look for your Papa." I step out of the room, cradling Ashby to my chest as we walk the halls calling for Lore.

My chest has never felt so heavy as two phrases echo in my mind; *I can't stay here.*

I hold Ashby tighter.

But I don't want to let go.

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Alrighty then, this one is a doozy too. We've got Seren and Lore getting extremely close--physically, at least. Spending a day among the children has really taken a toll on Seren and his beliefs. Is this the turning point

we've been waiting for? How will Seren face Lore again and what could possible happen next~

46. Crushing Weight

Even after playing games with the kids most of the day, I struggle to sleep come evening. Tossing and turning in bed from my overheated skin that even an open window and cool breeze can't fix. I lay awake for hours staring at the emerald canopy that reminds me of the thicket. Memories filter in, each more potent than the last. Lore leaning over me. The scent of his shampoo. His breath against my neck. My hands on his hips. His body against mine.

I throw myself out of bed long before dawn to take a run, then a jog, another run, and a freezing cold bath. None of which my body appreciates based on how sore it is when the sun finally does rise.

My eyelids weigh more than drenched robes, wishing for nothing more than to shut and send me to a land of nightmares. How I manage to stay awake through breakfast is beyond me. I poke at my food, smiling at the kids when they speak to me while pretending Lore doesn't exist. The mere sound of his voice forms goosebumps across my nape. I try to rub them away like they're dirt staining my skin.

At the end of breakfast, a butler arrives to retrieve our plates. I'm eager to escape into town under the guise of my research into the Red Moon group, but Lore abruptly calls to see me and Cyan in his office.

"Follow me for a moment," he says, tossling Hyun Woo's hair when he walks by. The boy giggles and swats at Lore's hand, then runs after Nalo towards the school house.

Cyan eyes me suspiciously. We walk side by side through the halls behind Lore. Sticking his nose in the air, Cyan takes two long steps ahead of me. I roll my eyes and let him keep ahead. It's starting to seem like Lore has nine kids instead of eight. Although, I guess technically Cyan is his kid. My mind is very tired right now.

Draven's already in Lore's office when we arrive. For once, he shows the briefest signs of an emotion other than discontent or annoyance. Dare I say it, a worried expression consumes his features, and that concern most certainly is pointed at Cyan. Whether Cyan notices the miniscule reaction is questionable. He doesn't give a reaction because he's fixated on following Lore like a lost puppy.

"I've received news concerning our passage to Vexsis," Lore declares. He stands behind his desk, resting a hand on a few papers. "The four of us will be departing in five days."

Cyan grins like he won the lottery. Maybe I would have been too had this situation not taken such a drastic turn in the last few days. Sweat forms on my brow. My muscles tense until they ache.

"I don't typically condone groups visiting Vexsis, however, this is a more than special case." Lore offers a phony smile. "Seren decided to make this more difficult by tagging along."

I guffaw. "You should have said no to me joining you if it's such trouble."

"If that's the case, wouldn't it be better to bring Arline?" Draven speaks up, turning all our attention to him. Cyan especially; his glare is downright combustive. I'm beginning to think he was some kind of explosive expert in his past life or perhaps a pyromaniac.

"Seren's a paladin of the Holy Church and Cyan's a mage who--" Draven hesitates. "His blood is considered a delicacy."

"The vampires want to eat me?" Cyan chortles. "Let them try."

"Vexsis is filled with vampires and their Warlords. Even your abilities can't protect you forever."

"If you hate the thought of me going so bad, just say it."

"My decision isn't up for debate," Lore interjects sternly. It's impressive how swiftly he silences Draven and Cyan. They freeze like, well, like

children who know better than to talk back, although Cyan simmers at a boiling point that's simply waiting to burn Draven to a crisp.

"Now, let's go over a few rules that also are not up for debate." His gaze lingers on me momentarily.

Huffing, I cross my arms and lean my weight from one foot to the other.

"We will be under constant surveillance, not only on our excursions but also at my estate. While the soldiers will not follow us into my home, they will remain on the premises and it is not to protect us. Due to this, none of you are to travel alone. Seren and Cyan must either be with me or Draven. If you're together, no doubt someone will try to start trouble--"

Lore holds up his hand when Cyan makes a move to speak. Once more, Cyan goes eerily quiet.

"I know you can handle yourself, but the vampires will only try to rile you up as an excuse to cause problems. None of you are to instigate the soldiers or civilians. If I see any of you so much as glare at them, I'll have you sent back to Earth without delay. In short, you must be on your best behavior." Lore claps his hands like he's speaking to a room of children. He looks at me when he asks, "Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," I grunt and Cyan follows. Draven gives a slow nod.

"Alright. Make sure you're ready to leave in five days. Cyan, Draven, you may go. Seren, stay," Lore orders, gesturing at Cyan and Draven to head for the door.

I'm oddly relieved about their departure. The heat from Cyan's stare alone risks another of his famous explosions. He hurries out of the room with Draven right behind. Although once they're both gone, I'm reminded that being alone with Lore is equally as dangerous.

"What more do you have to say to me?" I ask, hoping he'll make this quick.

"I thought I should warn you, due to the dangerous atmosphere, we will be sharing a room on the airship rides," Lore declares nonchalantly.

"...I beg your pardon?"

Smirking, he steps around the desk to approach me. I retreat when he reaches out. His hand hovers, seemingly stunned by my quick reaction. Sighing, his hand drops to his side. His usual teasing smirk soon overtakes his features. "You could say that I'm implying that you don't *always* have to be on your best behavior, particularly behind closed doors."

My hands clench into fists. My nails pierce the skin of my palm.

"You're so uptight," he adds. "I'm teasing about that. Not sharing a room. News will spread fast about you joining me. There's no telling if someone is keeping their eye on us or hoping to sabotage our trip. It has happened before."

That piques my interest.

"The vampires have tried to sabotage you?" I inquire. The tension eases in my hands. It's so much easier to speak business with Lore. I momentarily forget about everything else.

"Of course. They hate the idea of a dhampir having his hands on one of their precious mines."

"How did you get one?"

"Finders keepers is the rule in Vexsis," he explains around a devious grin that could rival a devil's. "I made a few friends among vampire nobility and hired a search party where I was lucky enough to stumble upon a rather rich nellore deposit."

He frowns at my disbelieving look.

"What?" he asks, resting a gentle hand over his chest. "You don't believe me?"

"Absolutely not. You accidentally stumbled on a mine that has made you filthy rich?" I scoff.

Lore shrugs. "I was filthy rich before I found the mine, thank you. But think of it what you will. The fact remains that most vampires don't care for me much either. We have to watch each other's backs."

I almost stumble over my own feet when Lore steps closer. I grasp the back of the couch to steady myself, which gives him the time to close in. A lump buries itself into my throat, refusing to dissipate no matter how much I swallow.

"Do you have my back, Seren?" he whispers, leaning in too close for me to think.

"Y-Yeah."

"Good." He brushes a strand of hair from my eyes, tucking it gently among the rest. Then he turns his back to me, heading to his desk while I practically sprint to the doors. Said doors slam shut behind me. My back presses against them as my chest heaves for breath, seeing as I wasn't breathing for that whole minute Lore stood in front of me.

Can I really do that; share a room with Lore? *For a few days?* He's incapable of keeping his hands to himself. He has no idea what the meaning of personal space is. Teasing and annoying me are his favorite pastimes. I'll be driven mad before we reach Vexsis or... or worse.

Lore flirts. Constantly. He pushes me too far as a game, a way to toy with me, and his own fucked up way to toy with the church. What better chance than this; while we're alone in a room? Just like the time we went undercover at the club. My body shivers at the memory.

Pushing away from the doors, I drag my feet through the halls. After all that has happened, after--after yesterday, can I even trust myself around Lore? If he pushes me again, I don't know if I can...

I hurry up the steps to my room that brings me little solace. The church already knows about me going to Vexsis, seeing as they always are informed if one of their members has been granted access. But they will expect to hear from me concerning what has been happening and more specifics on why Lore's going.

I sit at my small desk for hours, staring at a blank piece of paper. I squeeze the pen so hard it almost snaps. When I finally start, I press the pen so hard I rip through the paper. Grumbling, I toss the first two letters away and start over anew. At the end of the letter, my pen rests, unsure of what to put next.

Should I go through with requesting a new assignment? I could come up with an excuse. I'm not fit for this job or the Red Moon group may legitimately have moved to Silra. They need more of my attention than Lore, who likely isn't the killer--anything other than the truth. The terrifying truth that continuously rests atop my aching shoulders. Now, more than ever, I feel the weight on the verge of crushing me completely. I fear what will happen when it does...

But I can't handle the thought of their disappointment, so I sign the letter without asking to leave.

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Phew, Seren's got a lot on his plate and it seems like he's on the verge of losing it. It isn't helping that he's nervous about going to Vexsis as well. How do you think their travel plans are going to go? What do you expect to see in Vexsis? Will Seren be able to share a room with Lore without doing something a bit crazy? ;D

Behind the Scenes: Vexsis

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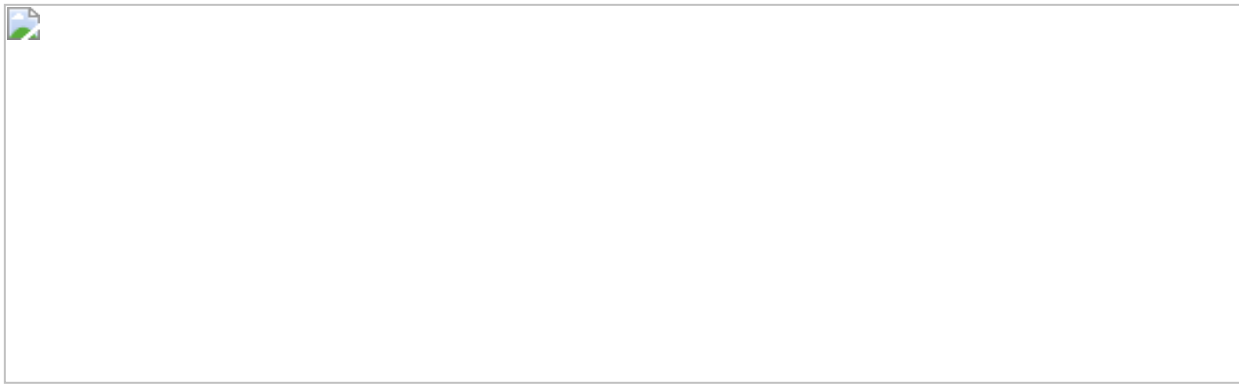


47. Seren's Bias

When I head to church to send my letter, Priest Niel has stacks of papers to give me. The church has sent as much information as they could on Lore, particularly news concerning the Seymour family. Though they attached strict instructions to hide these papers, as if I don't know to avoid Lore discovering them at all costs.

Then Priest Niel digs through his church robes while saying, "Ah, I found this letter from Jakoby. He must have forgotten to give it to you before he left."

"Left?" I ask, puzzled.

"Yes, he received a sudden summons from the church to begin his priest training early," Priest Niel announces proudly. "He left yesterday and must have sat this down in my office because I found it this morning."

Priest Niel offers an envelope with my name written on it.

Why would Jakoby leave a letter when he could call? I gave him the number to Lore's estate, even if I feared the teasing I'd get should any of those hoodlums answer. This is big news too. Maybe I could have left for the capital with him and waited there for Lore to go to Vexsis. I could have taken him on that tour (and avoided sharing a room on the first airship with Lore.)

There isn't anything for me to do now. I'll seek Jakoby out when our airship stops at the capital, but maybe he left a letter because he decided he no longer wishes to see me? Disappointment settles in my gut, accompanied by worry.

Taking the documents from Priest Niel, I thank him for his help and head to the precinct. Jaryl has had a few issues with vampire attacks recently so I'd like to be there if another happens. I don't plan to go over the documents

concerning Lore, the officers would likely tell him I was snooping if they caught on, but Jaryl surprises me with a closed off room.

"I thought you'd have an easier time combing through what you have on the Red Moon if you had some privacy," he says. "I know it isn't much, but it's better than having to hear us bitching all afternoon, yeah?"

"Thanks, I appreciate it." I set the papers on the small round table. "Let me know if you need anything from me."

"Will do." Jaryl shuts the door behind him.

Taking a seat, I go over Jakoby's letter first. He apologizes for not getting in contact. He didn't know what to say, but he hopes to see me again in the capital. I think that makes sense, but worry remains. It just feels off. Then again, I could have been the one hoping for more and Jakoby went along with it out of pity. I wouldn't be surprised. I haven't ever had a functioning relationship.

"Nothing to do about it now, I guess," I say to myself, switching my attention to the large stack of documents sent from the church.

I start from the beginning where I learn Lore did tell the truth about his biological parents. There are records of a mission from the church to track down a vampire who sexually assaulted a mortal woman. He was put to death for his crimes.

After that, there's a death certificate for Charlize Garlin, Lore's mother. He was sent to an orphanage where he was adopted by Monroe Seymour four years later. They provided him with excellent schooling where he excelled in every subject, but he didn't have a lot of social interaction.

His older adoptive siblings, Belroe and Leymin, attended private school while Lore was homeschooled. Belroe and Leymin met the queen, attended formal gatherings, and Belroe even won multiple large scale hunting events that the nobles do annually. That makes sense seeing as Lore, regardless of his adoptive family, is a dhampir. He was the charity case, not their actual child.

The oddities that stand out the most are the deaths and even the disappearance of the Seymour family members. First there was the eldest son, Belroe, four years older than Lore, who went missing on the night of Lore's 18th birthday. The family interviews claim he vanished, although Monroe's wife, Graeda, was adamant Lore had something to do with it.

"That vile creature is to blame," her interview says. *"We gave that blasted beast everything he could ever want, but he always skulked about, waiting for the perfect time to strike. He took my baby, I know he did!"*

Monroe wasn't as convinced; *"Lore couldn't have done anything to Belroe. He has barely begun learning his own trait. Belroe, on the other hand, is one of the most skilled mages in the kingdom on the path to guarding the queen herself."*

Based on Belroe's testing scores, he was a truly gifted seraphic. Although, as a noble, he served the monarchy rather than the church. In a few more years, he would have become a personal guard to the queen. That was a very high honor, one he likely wasn't willing to risk. The disappearance couldn't have been of his own volition.

However, the position he was about to take was incredibly sought after. Someone who wished to take his place could have gotten rid of Belroe and they would have the skills to do so.

Leymin, the Seymour daughter a year older than Lore, overdosed on heroin three years after Belroe's disappearance. She was found dead in her room. Once more, Graeda insisted Lore was to blame; *"Can't you see what's happening? He has taken my children one by one! He'll take everything we have, including our lives!"*

Maybe that'd be a little convincing if not for the interviews from multiple members of the aristocracy claiming Leymin, along with other noble children, liked to party a bit harder than they should have. Leymin was an addict.

Next came the deaths of Monroe and Graeda four years after Leymin's death. They bought themselves one of the newest vehicles on the market,

faster than any before. They went driving on a rainy night, drove too fast, and crashed. The fire was so intense that their bodies were unrecognizable. And just like that, Lore became Lord Seymour of Silra, one of the richest men alive.

No one has ever truly believed all of this to be an accident. There were multiple investigations into Lore and everyone around him to determine if something had been done to the Seymour family. But no matter what the nobles or the church did, no proof has ever been found. A dhampir managed to take the rule of a state and everyone hated him for it.

While I admit this is a lot of odd happenings that led to Lore's success, there's no proof and even some very basic explanations. Belroe was likely killed by a rival. Leymin partied and became an addict. Monroe wanted to show off his fast car. There's nothing here to point to Lore killing any of them, or anyone else for that matter.

Isn't the simple answer that Lore isn't who the church is looking for? And maybe... maybe Lore is an exception. He hasn't fallen to Elminore's chaos in 200 years so why would he now? The children are being raised in a loving home with more than they could ever want or need. All of them can, and probably will, grow up to be wonderful people who will potentially have even more wonderful families. None of them have to go bad. They can--they can be happy.

My fingers tighten against the paper, accidentally ripping through it.

"Damn it," I hiss, setting the paper aside to bury my face in my hands.

These thoughts are desperate and biased, aren't they? Because I've been around the children and I can't fathom them ever growing up to do what I've been told or even what I've seen from others. And Lore, if the day comes that he *did* lose himself after I've been sent here to investigate, who will be the one they send to dispatch him?

Me. I'd have to kill him.

Could I really kill him?

My blood runs cold.

"Seren!" I jolt at the sound of Jaryl's voice. He has thrown open the door to stare wide-eyed at me.

"Something has happened," he says, breathlessly. The precinct's a mess behind him. Officers sprint out of the office.

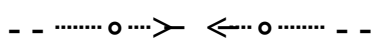
"Has there been an attack?" I ask, already running after Jaryl towards the exit.

"Yeah, at that brothel we've been watching."

The one that Lore knows about? The one that made him angry...

"Do you know what happened yet?" I ask suspiciously.

"No, only that it's a bloodbath."



Ah, shit. Seren is in some trouble. His boyfriend hit the road and he has learned about what happened to the Seymour family. It's making him second guess everything, including his own beliefs. Do you believe Lore was involved in their deaths or were they unfortunate accidents? And the attack on the brothel, could Lore have had something to do with it or is it a coincidence?

48. Words Like Poison

Sirens blare outside the brothel. A group of dhampir stand huddled together by a set of ambulances. A dhampir boy, who can't be much older than eighteen, shivers among the group. Blood stains his sunken cheeks, eyes wide in terror. A girl next to him puts her arm around his shoulder.

My stomach twists into a knot. Then Jaryl and I step inside, stunned at what we find. Calling this a bloodbath would be the understatement of the century. Corpses fill the bar and lay broken in the brothel rooms hidden below. Blood stains the floor, walls, and even the ceiling. Guns are clasped in the hands of the dead. Knives stick out of skulls and backs. A few sex workers died in the crossfire. Those who survived have been taken to the hospital for their injuries or stand outside, sputtering what happened to the officers.

"What the hell happened here?" Jaryl whispers under his breath, gaze scanning the crime scene that grows curiouser by the second. I inspect a few of what I believe to be the assailants, at least those who started the assault. They're closer to the front door and are riddled with bullet holes. They also share the same tattoo.

"Come look at this." I gesture for Jaryl, who leans over the bodies.

"The Black Dog gang," Jaryl snarls and scratches aimlessly at his neck. "We've seen their lot around a bit, but it didn't appear they had any animosity towards this place. If anything, we've caught a few of their members eagerly attending."

"What if those eager members didn't get what they wanted and came back for a refund the brothel refused to give?" I suggest, making Jaryl tug at his face like he thinks that'll spark an idea. He looks as confused as I feel, although that confusion begins to arouse suspicion too.

What are the chances that all these rat bastards that Lore wanted dead turn up dead? In one go!

An officer approaches us, shaking her head as she steps around the dead.

"What did the survivors have to say?" Jaryl asks.

"Nothing much we can go off of," she replies while flipping through her notes. "All of them were downstairs in their rooms either with a client or waiting for one. They heard a ruckus upstairs, the start of a fight, but that wasn't unusual. Then came the gunfire. There's another exit downstairs, which most of the workers ran for. Those who didn't get out in time, well..." She gestures at the mess around us.

"None of them saw anyone peculiar or heard what started the fight?"

She shakes her head wearing an apologetic frown. Jaryl's about to leave in order to speak to the survivors when I happen upon a clue.

"Look here!" I shout, managing to grab their attention. Jaryl and the other officer join me in analyzing one of the gang members.

"See how abnormally bloodshot his eyes are?" I hover my finger over his eye that has yet to fully dull, then point at the veins. "And the veins here are too dark. That could be a sign that divinity has been used against them."

"There may have been a mage in here during the assault," Jaryl says.

"Maybe, but since this happened so recently, there may be a bit of the cast left." I hold my hand above his head. Gold light trickles from my fingertips like spiderwebs reaching around his eye and into his ears. His veins glow beneath his skin, then the webs retreat, dragging a darkness with them that dissipates almost instantly.

"What was that?" the officer asks, sounding disgusted.

"Proof that a mage messed with this guy's mind and likely the others," I answer.

"Meaning someone forced gang members to shoot up a brothel?" Jaryl inquires.

"Possibly, or a mage could have given them the power to do so. Regardless, I doubt a mage who can cast this is among the dead."

Jaryl's frown grows to astronomical proportions. His face reminds me of a very upset pug. "Can you check if this was *only* used on the gang members?" he grumbles while pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I'll try, but it may be out of the other's system by now." I hurry around the bar examining as many bodies as I can.

After a few minutes, there's no use, but I was able to conclude, out of everyone I checked, the gang members were the only ones affected. The rest of the evening is spent talking to the survivors and cleaning up. Unfortunately, none of us learn much else. No one saw anything, at least no one who survived.

Even if Lore wanted to burn this place to the ground, he couldn't have done this, right? Then again, a rich and powerful Lord could orchestrate such an attack. He may know of a mage capable of this and sent them to do the dirty work. After all, the survivors are sex workers, the very ones Lore wanted to protect. Not a single gang member, patron, or other worker at the establishment survived. He wouldn't though, right? Even if he could, Lore... he just wouldn't.

I hope he wouldn't.

I head home late after that catastrophe. The officers are busy with the attack so I don't manage to grab a ride, but maybe that's for the best. Walking gives me time to think about what I'm doing here, what's expected of me, and my desperate attempts to prove Lore's innocence at this point. As if he needs it proved because everything's subjective! He *could* have done something, but there's no proof he *has* . All this gives me a headache strong enough to split open my skull.

"Sir, excuse me," a woman's voice comes from up ahead. I stop, thinking she's speaking to me, then I spot her curled up on the corner of a church. Her hands are outstretched towards a man standing over her.

"Could you spare some change?" She asks, her eyes a pale green, but her pointed ears peek out of a dark hood. Her face is so sunken in that her fangs stick over her bottom lip.

The man gives her a once over, staring longingly at her bare legs. He smirks. "Sure, but I think I should get something in return."

That scummy bastard! She's weak and starving and all he's thinking about is sex? I'm gonna whoop his ass into next week! Before I get to him, a priest comes hurtling down the steps. A sense of relief washes over me that the woman will be given shelter. Then the priest throws a stone at her. The woman wails when the rock hits her temple.

"Why are you still here, vermin?!" The priest calls. He hurries over to the man, smiling apologetically. "Was she bothering you, Sir?"

The man clears his throat, mumbles something, and walks away. I'm too stunned at what I'm seeing to say anything when he brushes by me.

"I told you to get away from here," the priest snarls at the woman. "I'll call the police if you keep this up."

"But you said the weak and helpless can seek shelter here," she whimpers, holding a gentle hand against her bloody temple. "Please, I just need a place to stay until I find work. I can clean! I'm really good at cleaning!"

She whimpers when the priest raises his hand in preparation to hit her. My feet finally listen. I grasp the priest's wrist so firmly I damn near break it. He bellows, likely ready to curse at me. But then he sees what I am. His eyes widen, as do hers.

"P-Paladin of the Holy Church," the priest gasps. "What... Holy Mothers, what perfect timing. This wretch--"

"Don't call her that," I interject, causing him to stare at me, perplexed.

He glances hesitantly between us. "My apologies for using such harsh language, Paladin. Um, my wrist, you're holding it awfully tight."

I release him and turn my attention to the woman who damn near bites through her bottom lip from the attention. When I reach towards her, she screams; "I'm sorry, I'll leave! I'll leave, I promise!"

"No, I wanted to give--" Before I can grab money from my pocket, the woman scrambles to her feet.

"Good riddance," the priest says firmly as we watch her rush like the hounds of hell are snapping at her ankles. I once loved that vampires and dhampir alike sometimes ran at the sight of me. Now, I can't stomach it. My glare fixates on the priest who continues beaming until he catches the look. He stiffens, eyes curious when he asks, "What troubles you, Paladin? My, I didn't even get to ask why you are here!"

"Why I'm here is none of your concern," I growl, then grip the collar of his robes. He grunts in surprise. "Why was there a starving woman sitting helplessly outside of a church?"

Momentarily stunned, the priest sputters for a response that inevitably becomes, "Because that was a dhampir. We can't possibly let her in among the faith--"

He gags when my grip tightens so hard that his robes choke him.

"She is someone in need of help. We do not turn a blind eye to that, regardless of who they are!" I shout. The words sink in like poison. My mind grows numb then hot all at once. I release the priest, who stumbles aside, coughing erratically.

We don't turn a blind eye to those in need. *We aren't meant to.* But we have and we do.

What if something awful happened at Seymour Manor and the children were sent to the streets? Oliver and Isabella would more likely find homes among fellow mortals, but the others, they'd be treated like garbage. How is that right? How is it right that I'm here investigating a likely innocent man simply because the church doesn't like him? Lore hasn't shown any signs of being the culprit, if there even is one. What if the church set this all up as an excuse to investigate those they don't like?

I stop at the corner of the street, having not even realized I walked away. My arm aches from how hard I hold it, fingernails piercing the skin. What am I doing second guessing the church? *Who am I* to second guess them? All this... it's for the greater good. It has to be because... because...

What am I without the church?

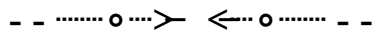
A murderer.

Who am I without the church?

No one.

Without the church, I'll be nothing. No one. No family. Nowhere to go. Nothing to be.

But am I any better with the church?



Oh buddy, this is a BIG chapter! First, we have the attack on the brothel. A mage was involved. Do you think Lore could have hired someone? Is he to blame for the attack? And now Seren's seriously asking himself a lot of questions. Is this the start of him stepping away from the church or will he close himself off even more? What do you think about how he feels concerning the church; who is he without it etc.

49. The Undeniable Truth

Cyan P.O.V.

I'm finnicking with some equations in the lab that lead nowhere. My mind has been wandering for some time now, probably because the sun has set a while ago. Typically, Draven would have arrived to nag about how I need proper sleep to function, especially me because I hardly function with enough sleep. I would whine about needing to work while I'm in my groove. He'd proceed to nag even more until I got so bothered that I'd lose that groove and leave.

However, Draven and I have, once more, decided to halt communications until further notice. Admittedly, that was mostly my decision after he seemed so adamant in not wanting me to travel to Vexsis. Doesn't he understand that Lore respects his decision? If he pushed to leave me behind, Lore would have listened. This is another chance to prove myself! Especially in Vexsis, somewhere I may be useful. Lore seems to know that if he actually wanted to bring me.

Why does Draven get in the way of that? One minute he's claiming he doesn't want to treat me like a child, the next that's exactly what he's doing! What a blundering blockhead.

Bang!

I jolt at the abrupt opening of the laboratory doors. Unfamiliar giggles echo from the dark entrance followed by Seren's voice, "Shh, shh. Doors be quiet."

...is this sniveling simpleton drunk?

I turn to gawk at Seren tumbling through the lab. He comes closer to the lights illuminating the front of the cathedral. They reveal his watery eyes and rumpled robes that have a few dirt stains that I imagine he got from

tripping over his own fumbling feet. He smiles giddily when spotting me, outstretching his hands.

"Cyan!" He bellows, then burps. "You... uh, just the person I'm looking for!"

"I'd prefer if I wasn't," I say, puzzled by how his boisterous laughter ricochets off the walls to painfully intrude my ears.

"You're funny," he states, pointing accusingly at me, or at least trying to. He's swaying like ocean waves in a tsunami. And that bumbling buffoon almost stumbles his way into a batch and very harmful chemicals if not for my cat-like reflexes. I narrowly reach Seren in time, grasping his arm to drag him away from the dangerous shelving.

"I don't know why you drank nor do I care, but I do care about a drunk being in my lab. Be a dear and fuck off, alright?" I smile at the drunkard, who merely blinks at me.

"Cyan," he says, fiercely grasping my shoulders. I'm relieved it wasn't my hands where there's no clothes to protect me. Though my shoulders start to tingle, it's bearable, especially when Seren pleads, "Tell me why you left."

"Ex-fucking-cuse you, cretin?" I knock his hands away and point at the door. "I'm giving you five seconds to vacate the premises before I knock you out and toss you off a very high cliff without a parachute."

He could use magic to survive the fall, but I'd make sure to do it while he's still tipsy to make the odds of his death higher.

A drunk Seren is full of surprises. He drops to his knees, hands clinging to my shirt. They tremble so violently that I feel the vibrations through the fabric. He looks up at me, an unreadable glint in his eyes. Desperation laces his every word; "Please, please tell me why you left. Why did you need Lore's help to escape?"

This bastard reeks of booze. I smelt it the moment he stepped through the doors. He's an absolute mess, drunk out of his fucking mind, and I can't

imagine why. Alcohol was never prohibited among the church, but getting this drunk was frowned upon. A lot of damage could be done by a drunk powerful mage.

"Answer me first, why are you wasted? What happened?" I ask, settling beside him, otherwise I'll have to rip my own shirt off to escape his vice grip. I have no intention to tell him the truth, but maybe he'll talk for a bit then pass out. With how much he drank, I'm surprised he managed to make it back at all.

"Earlier," he whispers, flopping onto his butt like a sad toddler. "Earlier, I started to think that I don't want, and maybe--maybe I don't believe, that the children will grow up to be bad. Watching them, playing beside them, it makes me want to believe there's good in everyone, including vampires and dhampir. But that--that, it goes against the Holy Mother's teachings and I..." Seren scratches erratically at his own neck.

I know the look, the feeling of wanting to claw out of your own skin from overwhelming thoughts. Looking back on what you went through, and in Seren's case, what he did, it's no wonder he damn near rips through his own skin. I knock his hand with mine, covered by the sleeves of my shirt, of course. It makes him stop itching, but he rocks instead.

"I'm wondering if the Holy Mother's teachings are wrong," he whispers so softly I strain to hear him. "Earlier, a desperate woman sat outside a church, a place of safety and hope, but that church turned her away. Why?"

I shrug when he looks at me for an answer.

"Because she was a dhampir and that, Cyan, that's not right. We shouldn't--" He presses his hands to his chest, eyes wide and erratic. "I shouldn't be okay with that. If someone needs help, regardless of who they are, you should help them. I believed that when I was a kid to the point that the priests always told me I was too kind. My kindness would get me killed. I looked for the good in others when it wasn't there and they made that sound bad." He looks at me again for an answer, asking quietly, "Do you think that's bad?"

"No," I answer without hesitation. "You saw their lies and real liars pick away at the truth until they make you believe that you're the one in the wrong."

Seren sinks his head like a scolded child. He picks at the ropes around his waist. The ropes fray erratically. How am I meant to ignore him when he's acting like a kicked puppy? Puppies are my weakness. They should be everyone's weakness. Never trust someone who doesn't love animals.

And, in all seriousness, this is the only time Seren has really shown that he may be breaking free of the church. Drunk words are sober thoughts, right? This is as truthful as he has ever been with me, not the guy from back when we initially spoke and he tried to lie that he never considered leaving the church.

"Listen, you giant dunce, I am only talking about this once so you better hope your drunk ass remembers this in the morning," I growl at him. He turns in place, like he thinks facing me might help him remember, then he eagerly nods.

I can't believe I'm telling Seren this when the only other person who knows is Lore. But if anyone should know the truth other than Lore, it's Seren. Because we've gone through the same experiences and, had I not escaped, Seren is who I may have become.

And maybe that's why he terrifies me.

"I imagine the church saved you when you were quite young," I say, noting how Seren nods. "A dhampir *bought* me off my parents, like I was property to be taken to... somewhere not good. I knew what he was going to make me do and..." I crack my neck to the side. "My magic awakened in time. I narrowly escaped so, yeah, vampires fucking terrified me after that. A Surveyor of the church found me and took me to Trinia. I loved it there," I admit, remembering the beginning days where I spent time frivolously with other children.

Although I had been around other children all my life, we spent more time struggling to survive in the streets than playing. We learned to lie and

deceive. Playing was another luxury we couldn't afford. But it wasn't like that at the church. I went to bed full and woke up to a warm breakfast. No one looked at me with greedy eyes. No one touched me with foul intentions. I was safe.

"Taking you to the orphanage, that's how the church gets you," I explain, feeling my teeth start to grind. "You lose your family or never had one, then they show you what a family is. They give you friends who understand everything you went through. A beautiful home filled with toys, food, warmth, and care. You cling to that, desperately wishing for no one to tear it away from you again because you know what it's like to lose it. To starve and beg and barely survive."

"Do you remember all the stories they told us about vampires? The Dark Lord Elminore controlling their bloodlust, making them destroy families--making us remember how we lost ours. And that fear, the fear they put in here--" I press my finger against his chest, over his heart. "It drives us to protect the new family we were given. Our siblings sitting beside us and the church who has taken care of us; we begin to believe we owe them everything."

"You went through training?" Seren asks and, dare I say it, he sounds like he's hopeful I'll say no.

"Some of it, yeah. I wanted to fight for the Holy Church, to thank them for what they did and what they had given me, as well as protect others."

"But?" He urges.

"But there was a girl at the orphanage, someone strong and confident, who never broke no matter how much the church tried. Her name was Halliya. I'd like to think she was my inspiration," I laugh at the memories that I regret have faded. I don't know if I truly remember her face or if it's just a figment of my imagination.

"She must have been a troublemaker," Seren says, making me smirk.

"The biggest troublemaker of them all. She makes me look tame."

Seren makes an impressed O with his mouth.

"Halliya was brave and outspoken, openly condemning the church for their training methods. Although she lost her family during a dhampir attack, she stood by what she believed; that vampires and dhampir were not a scourge upon the earth. What happened was unfortunate, but she wouldn't hate an entire race for it. She tried convincing others of that, always back talking to the teachers and refusing to participate in church activities. As the days went by, I started to believe her, but..."

Seren rests a gentle hand on my shoulder. It's then I realize that I'm shaking. I roll my shoulders to knock his hand aside.

"Suddenly, she went missing. The church claimed she decided it was best for her to leave, but I knew Halliya. She had become a dear friend. She wouldn't have left without a word. Then I started noticing how other kids went missing. Those who were like her, against the church. They always gave the same excuse, but it didn't feel right." I clench my hands until they ache. I look Seren in the eye, who I know isn't ready to hear this, but I won't sugarcoat the truth. "The children who went missing, the ones I knew and the ones you undoubtedly knew too, the church got rid of them before they caused too much ruckus."

Seren shakes his head adamantly, eyes wide once more. He wrings his hands together, threatening to rub the skin off his knuckles. "They wouldn't do that," he declares.

As expected, he went straight to denial. I did too.

"Why not?" I counter. "None of the missing kids had a family to check on them. None had anywhere to go. There was no one to miss them--"

"They wouldn't do that!" Seren screams so loudly his voice breaks.

I'd be upset if I didn't notice the horrifying realization in his eyes. He's already making a list of kids that "failed tests" or "decided to leave," and realizing they are long gone.

"They wouldn't do that," he repeats over and over, tears building his eyes. When he begins rocking in place, I grab his arm. He stumbles to his feet. The only reason he can stand is because I'm his crutch.

"It's only a hunch," I say in hopes to calm him prior to him dropping to crack his head against the stone floor. Everyone would probably assume I did it on purpose. "But you need to realize, Seren, that the church is an organization. Not everyone is likely involved, but some are and they're hiding something because they can. That's what power does."

Seren's heavy breathing signifies that he can't handle any more. I grapple with his arm to guide him out of the laboratory, watching his pained expression grow worse until he falls into a fit of tears.

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Finally, Seren has gotten a real talk with Cyan, even if he had to be drunk to do it. What do you think after hearing Cyan's story? How will Seren handle this revelation? Will he even remember it in the morning lol

50. Cyan's Nightmare

Cyan P.O.V.

Lugging Seren's deadweight back to his room is my workout routine for the month. He weighs way more than I thought, or my noodle arms are merely that weak. For my own sake, I'm going for the former option.

After dropping his ass off in his room, I hurry away before he wakes up to cry more. I had to listen to his sniffles and, frankly, I hate the sound of snot.

"Don't tell me Seren's dead body is in there," Arline says outside the door.

I nearly scream in terror, but instead glare at her. "Hasn't anyone told you that you shouldn't sneak up on someone in the dead of night?"

"Someone might have mentioned it once or twice, but hasn't anyone told you not to leave a dead body in a place it'll be easily discovered? Especially if that body can be quickly tied back to you."

"He's not dead," I growl, lightly pushing open the door so Arline can see Seren on his bed. Breathing. And unharmed. Physically, at least. Mentally, if he remembers tomorrow, he will be severely fucked up.

"Pity," she says. "Why were you in there with him?"

"He drank himself silly, then paid me a horribly unpleasant visit to ask why I left the church."

Arline eyes me suspiciously. "And did you tell him?"

"Yep."

"How'd he take what I imagine to be the hard truth?"

"He sputtered denials and cried the whole way here."

"He may not be a total lost cause then." She smirks devilishly. "If we all speak to him some more, we may end up making a paladin leave the Holy Church. When was the last time that happened?"

I laugh. "Long enough for neither of us to remember."

"Didn't His Grace warn us not to meddle with Seren without his permission?" Draven asks, appearing around the corner from the stairs. He leans against the wall, arms crossed and eyes narrowed. "The two of you better stop concocting whatever horrendous idea you've come up with."

"We haven't concocted anything," Arline claims, hands held up in surrender. "Cyan merely gave Seren a good talking to and now he might be more palpable."

"His Grace will determine if that's true or not. As he said, our job is to protect the children and the estate. That is all."

"You're so fucking annoying," Arline grumbles, then leans down to whisper in my ear. "I don't know what you see in him."

I give her another glare that she ignores. Claiming she's ready for bed, Arline takes her leave, disappearing down the stairs to her room on the first floor. I'm about to join her when Draven steps in my path.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Why wouldn't I be?" I attempt to step around him, huffing angrily when he holds out his arm so I run into it. Stumbling back, I turn my glare to him. "You do recall that we are, once again, not talking to each other after that shit you pulled in His Grace's office."

Draven scowls. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"Oh, really? I'm so sorry for misunderstanding. Whatever could you have actually meant by insisting I shouldn't be allowed to follow His Grace to Vexsis?"

Draven has either been stumped speechless or, more likely, he doesn't want to reply. Rolling my eyes, I walk around him, ramming my shoulder into his arm. He grunts.

"Cyan," he calls, following me down the stairs. "You know you have this annoying belief that everything I do implies you can't handle yourself--"

"Because you have this annoying habit of constantly implying it," I counter, pivoting on my heel at the bottom of the stairs. Draven almost slips down a few stairs when I, unexpectedly, start jamming him in the gut with my finger. "I know I made a mistake three years ago. I got myself shot. I know you feel guilty about it because you were meant to be watching me on that mission, but I learned my lesson and I haven't made a mistake like that again, have I?"

Draven averts his amber eyes.

"Have I?!" I repeat, earning a warning look from him.

"You haven't," he finally states.

"Exactly, so stop trying to fuck everything up for me." I retreat, ready to walk away triumphantly with the wind blowing through my hair. But Draven catches up and grasps my shoulder tightly.

He spins me around to face his brilliant orange eyes that, for one of the very few times in his life, shimmer with earnest concern that even I can't deny. That concern freezes me in place long enough for him to speak, "I grew up in Vexsis, Cyan. I know how vampires think and feel about mortals. Trust me when I say, what you think you know pales in comparison to the truth."

"Here, you have the upperhand, there's no denying that, but that will not be the case in Vexsis. You think you know what Warlords are capable of; you don't. And you think your magic can keep you safe from all they throw at you; it won't. The treaty we have doesn't always save everyone. You and Seren are not safe, no matter how much you think otherwise," he says, every word growing softer until his voice is barely a whisper by the end.

"His Grace and I aren't either. We've had our struggles every time we visit and, yes, I'm terrified of what may happen this time. I do not mean to make you sound incapable. I only mean to express this danger," he finishes.

Releasing my shoulders, his hands drop listlessly to his side. What am I meant to say after that? Draven showing legitimate concern and actually allowing one to hear it in his voice, I'd say it's a miracle, but it feels more like a curse.

"You're acting like you think I'm going to start trouble as soon as I get there," I mumble, huffing when he reveals a faint smirk.

"You *always* start trouble."

"Not on purpose. At least not always." I cross my arms. "If you're that worried, talk to me about it. Don't spew shit in front of His Grace."

Draven nods, then puzzles me for the umpteenth time this evening by asking, "Are you feeling alright after talking with Seren?"

"Right now, yes." Although that may not always be the case. I don't like talking about the past because it makes me think about it. Thinking about it makes me remember. Remembering gives me nightmares. "It's late. We should get to bed," I add.

"Yeah, goodnight," Draven calls after me as I head to my room.

"Night." I offer a quick wave and hurry to my room. There, I get ready for bed, dreading what's to come. I lay awake for a while, tossing and turning like I'm trying to escape sleep. Eventually, sleep takes me and the nightmares I expected to have appear.

Three days Halliya had been missing. That was when Paladin Nallin had all the Holy Knight trainee's meet at the training grounds. She made an announcement, "Halliya has decided to leave the church."

A series of gasps and murmurs spread through the group. I sat in the back, far from the others, covered from head to toe in blue cloth. Even my hood

was pulled up to shield my face. The sun barely rose over the cathedral, rays peeking gently through the morning mist. I snapped the rubberband on my bruised wrists in a desperate attempt to calm my raging nerves.

"As everyone is aware, she did not agree with our ways and we respect her decision to no longer continue her training. She wished to make a life of her own far from here and we have done everything we can to help her with that," Nallin continued. The group began to nod in understanding. "She asked us to convey a message to you all; that she's sorry for abandoning you, but she believes all of you will be strong even without her. Like her, you'll make your own lives and find your own happiness. She has asked to be left alone as she doesn't want to think of her time here. We should also respect that request. Does anyone have any questions?"

I tentatively raised my hand.

"Yes, Cyan?"

"Did Halliya mention why she left without speaking to any of us first?" I asked, barely refraining from specifically asking why she didn't tell me.

I thought we were friends. I thought we were family. How many times did she stay up with me at night, listening to me recant the nightmares that plagued me? She was the only person whose hand I could hold for longer than a moment without getting sick. Most of all, she promised we'd always be together. She'd never leave the church until she convinced me to leave with her. I was just starting to think I should. My eyes were opening to a truth I feared to truly learn, but now she's gone. And I don't know if I want to continue lifting the lid on that box alone.

"She didn't want to trouble any of you more than she already had. After a few talks with me, we both decided it'd be best if she left quietly." Nallin stepped around the group to approach me. She knelt at my side, frowning apologetically. "I know the two of you were close and I know she's sorry about leaving, but this is for the best. She'll be happier."

"Right." I nodded even if every piece of me screamed this wasn't right.

As Nallin walked away, the world suddenly slanted. My fellow trainees faded. Colors bled like wet paint, leaking into the other until they painted the world black. Only I sat among the void, incapable of moving even as a cold hand slipped over the back of my neck.

"Why didn't you search for me?" Halliya's broken voice whispered against my ear. The stench of rot overtook my nostrils, making me gag. "I thought we were friends. I thought we were family," she said, appearing out of my peripheral vision.

I bit back a whimper upon seeing her rotting corpse. Maggots squirmed out of her empty eye sockets. Blood caked her once vibrant strawberry blonde hair to her bloated skin. Her jaw didn't move quite right when she spoke, "You knew something was wrong, but you didn't come find me. Why didn't you find me?"

She disappeared only to reappear in front of me. Her clawed hands grasped my throat. I couldn't push her away as she leaned in, hissing every word, "Why didn't you save me?"

"Cyan!"

I heave a powerful breath, awakening sweaty in bed. Draven leans over me, eyes frantic. His hands hold my wrists to the bed, wrists that feel oddly sore, as does the rest of my body. My right cheek aches and sweat has made my skin stick to the bed.

"You were harming yourself in your sleep," Draven explains, tentatively releasing my wrists. He hurries to the connected bathroom, speaking as he works. "I think you've got a fever. We should have some medicine, but use this until I get back."

Draven returns with a warm rag that he sits on my forehead.

"What time is it?" I ask, feeling groggy.

"It's still late." He nods towards the window. No light comes from the cracks of the curtains. "I could hear you shouting from my room."

"Did I wake the kids?"

He shakes his head.

"What... was I saying?"

Draven grabs the rag to dab the sweat from my neck. I would knock his hand away, but I kind of like it.

"I couldn't really make it out," he says.

"Liar," I spit and sit up. Draven makes a move to push me back down, but I refuse to do so. "What was I saying?"

He frowns, eyes saying he doesn't wish to reply. Then he sighs. "That you were sorry." He drops the rag in my lap. "I'll get some medicine." He leaves the room.

I fall back into bed. Talking to Seren was even worse than I expected.

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Yikes, Cyan had an unpleasant nightmare. What do you think actually happened to Halliya? Do you believe Cyan's hunch; that the church "got rid of her?" And, aw, isn't it sweet that Draven cares so much and even came running to check on him~

51. Can't Be

Seren P.O.V.

I awake the following morning overcome by more than a hangover. Dread. Too much to withstand. The sensation of drowning. Disbelief and horror filling my lungs. They ache similarly to my heart and mind. Both fight among themselves as I recall the night perfectly, regardless of my intoxication.

"The children that went missing, the ones I knew and the ones you undoubtedly knew too, the church got rid of them before they caused too much ruckus."

"They wouldn't do that," I repeat the same words I told Cyan, equally as desperately, if not more so.

My feet swing over the bed. I grasp the bedside table to keep me up when my legs nearly give out. I'm unclear if that is due to the drinking prior or what I heard. Just like I'm unclear why I throw up, thankfully in the toilet, over and over. My raw throat begs for a moment of reprieve while my stomach insists I upchuck everything, then sit there heaving.

"Why not? None of the missing kids had a family to check on them. None had anywhere to go. There was no one to miss them."

They wouldn't. They couldn't. Family doesn't do that to each other. We came together after suffering in similar ways. All we have is each other and we must be loyal--

"You lose your family or never had one, then they show you what a family is. They give you friends who understand everything you went through. A beautiful home filled with toys, food, warmth, and care. You cling to that, desperately wishing for no one to tear it away from you again. It drives us to protect the new family we were given. Our siblings sitting beside us and

the church who has taken care of us; we begin to believe we owe them everything."

But I *do* owe them everything. If Olere hadn't found me when he did, I'd be dead. If Olere didn't stop me from throwing myself from the top of the cathedral, I'd be dead. If the church didn't take me in and give me purpose, I'd be dead. Because I have nothing else to live for. The moment my family died, I didn't know what to do, who I was, or where I could go. The church helped me find that. They helped others. We're meant to protect. It's for the greater good! It has to be...

"Seren?" Lore stands in the bathroom doorway donning a concerned frown.

Why concern? Why does he have to look like he cares? I can't handle it.

"Get out," I demand, voice raspy from abuse.

"But you're--"

"I said get out!" I shove Lore away. If he falls, I don't see it as I slam and lock the door.

"Seren, if you're feeling unwell, we need to get you some medicine," he says from the other side, rattling the doorknob. Lore's concern falls upon deaf ears. I can't hear another word as my mind plagues me with conflict.

Cyan is right. I can think of quite a few from my youth who "left." Those who spoke against the church or didn't show the same loyalty as the rest of us. Their leaving always made sense; they weren't interested in the church so why would they stay? And why would they continue contacting us if they wanted to start a new life?

Or did it never make sense and I merely hoped it did? Because if I stood against the church, I'd lose them. The last family I had. Then I'd have to face what had been done to me and what I had done to others. I began training at the age of eleven. My childhood was stripped away. Rather than hold me and tell me everything would be okay, the church put a weapon in

my grasp. They told me to stand strong, to fight against monsters who tore my life to shreds, then they put those monsters in front of me.

"Pick your weapon," Paladin Nallin said. She stood in front of a table lined with weapons that we all had trained with over the past few years. I grasped the axe that had become an extension of my arm since I picked it up two years ago.

"Follow me," she demanded, guiding me through the tunnel to the arena. Darkness filled the tunnel save for the few torches lining the walls. As we approached the iron gate, a single barred window allowed a hint of light to filter in.

"Today, you've earned the right to fight." Nallin rested a proud hand on my shoulder. I tried not to shake, tried not to show fear for what I knew I would face behind that gate. "Remember, this bastard slaughtered five innocent people. There are countless survivors who now have to live without their loved ones and two children at our orphanage without parents."

Her words lit a fire within me. I let that fire roar, to burn through my veins. The anger pushed me through the gate. Another iron gate across the sandy pit opened. A dhampir came barrelling out. His eyes squinted from the light. I lunged forward before he got his bearings.

My family cheered. They called my name, encouraging me to rid the world of another beast. Another who destroyed families and would destroy us if we let them.

"Get him!"

"Kill him, Seren!"

The dhampir's eyes were ablaze with what I thought to be pure rage. But after I relieved him of his head, I started to think it was fear. For the briefest moment, there was pity until I remembered the lives he took.

My first kill was at fourteen years old. And people cheered.

Pressing my back to the bathroom door, I slide to the floor. I bring my knees to my chest, burying my face within them. I refuse to accept the tears.

At fourteen, I should have been worried about boys, how I'd get a date, wonder what it was like to have my first kiss, and staying out late with friends. I should have been going to school, worrying about passing the next math test, or reading raunchy books without telling my parents. Instead, I learned how to kill. And when I didn't do well enough, when I didn't show the cruelty I should have, I got in trouble.

I trained from sun up until sun down in the yard. Paladin Nallin always told us to imagine the enemy; red eyed, orange eyed, gold eyed beasts instead of straw puppets. Sometimes that worked and I hit with all my might. Others, I hesitated. She didn't like that.

"You're hesitating," Nallin growled. I whimpered when she brought the rod against my aching knuckles. "You cannot hesitate on the field. It will get you and your family killed!"

"But... but let's say a vampire bit someone and they survived. Do I still kill them? I don't think that's befitting of their crime and--and maybe they'd get better if we talked to them or got them help," I mumbled more to myself than Nallin. She still heard and her gaze hardened to stone.

She brought the rod against the back of my thighs so hard that my knees gave out. I fell to the ground, grasping my burning thighs. Her steel tipped boots came into my vision. I peered fearfully up at her hollow eyes.

"A vampire bite is a death sentence," she lectured, pointing the rod threateningly at me. "Dead or not, the addiction to blight is more likely to kill you. Even if it doesn't, it will likely destroy everything and everyone you love. You know that well, don't you, Seren?"

I remembered Mom on the bloody carpet, how she didn't even see me, how she didn't hear me beg to be saved.

"Vampires and dhampir are all alike. We give them the mercy of living out a few decades of their pathetic lives until they make the wrong move, that is

more than they deserve. Now get up!" She yanked me to my feet. When I swayed, she whacked my thighs again. "Keep steady. Never fall. You won't have the chance to get back up on the field."

"Yes, Paladin Nallin." I grasped my wooden axe and returned to hitting the practice dummy.

"And Seren," Nallin called a few steps away. I looked at her over my shoulder. "The concern you show them is a weakness. If you wish to take your place beside the rest of us, if you wish to make a name for yourself, I suggest you get rid of that concern. Fast."

And I did get rid of it, as she requested, because I wanted to prove myself. I fought against short rebellions and searched for vampires drunk on blood. I battled them, made sure they couldn't hurt others, and told myself what the church always told me; all the pain I went through was for the greater good. So others would not go through the same horror I did. If all I've known is a lie, what happens? What am I?

It can't be. Cyan must be wrong. It was a hunch and a wrong one. He can't be right.

He can't be.

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Kind of a dark chapter to post this announcement on, but hey, I am going to start working on a patreon exclusive story. I want readers to pick what that next story will be. Please use the external link or follow the one on my dashboard to take the google form. If you're a patron, there's a patreon poll if you rather use that. Please don't vote twice!

Seren's really struggling with what Cyan had to say. What do you think about all the training Seren went through? Will he be able to let go of the past or live with what he has done? My poor baby is having such a tough time D:

52. Surprise After Surprise

Over the next few days, I avoid everyone. Cyan. Draven. Arline. The children. And especially Lore. Rather than eat breakfast with them, I grab a plate from the kitchen. Sometimes I leave before breakfast, heading into town to investigate? Wander? Panic? The world's slipping through my fingers, thin and coarse as sand. The more the sand filters past my fingertips, the more raw my skin becomes. Every movement aches. Every thought pierces my chest.

What am I doing here? What am I meant to do now?

On the morning we're to leave for Vexsis, I grab my bag to pack and try to shove my thoughts into an equally cramped space.

Cyan said what he said to deceive me.

But if that's the case, wouldn't he have told me at the beginning to keep me on edge, always?

The church, my family, would never do such horrendous acts.

The church locks up criminals so children can behead them.

Lore and his gang of misfits excel at deception.

So does the church.

"Seren, may I come in?" Lore asks after a few knocks against my bedroom door.

His voice rings in my ears. I shove an extra robe into my bag and reply, "I'd say no, but I already hear you turning the doorknob."

The door swings open. Lore steps in, more lavishly adorned than usual. His blue suit, no matter how boisterous, pales in comparison to his eyes. The

ones that lock on me, as they have been since my continuous avoidance. He concentrates for so long at times that I swear his gaze has singed my skin.

"I've come to see if you're ready," he claims, approaching me swiftly, too swiftly. I don't zip my bag shut in time. "What are these ghastly garments?" Lore gasps, managing to grab my underwear that he somehow spotted under my robes.

"Stop acting like a child and put that back," I demand, refusing to look at him. Seeing Lore stretch my underwear like he's inspecting the quality of the product is the last thing I expected to happen this morning. And, frankly, I am not in the mood for these games. I'm not in the mood for anything but sleep. A lot of it.

"These are appalling," he states. "I know they do nothing to show off your astounding ass."

I snatch my underwear from him. "Fuck off."

"Oh, are you upset because you agree or because you're feeling shy after the compliment? With your attire, I imagine not many have made such remarks, but you could change that if you'd wear those suits I bought you."

"Shouldn't you be packing or pushing paper work instead of annoying me?" I huff while stashing my underwear back into the bag.

This is why I've been avoiding him. He makes me stumble over every step. He creates cracks in a foundation I always believed to be unbreakable. I don't know what to do about those breaks. Do I let it collapse and see where it takes me?

"I am not here only to annoy," he claims smugly. "I am here about those suits, actually."

"I'm not wearing them just so you can sexually harass me."

Lore chortles as he approaches my wardrobe. There, he plucks the three suits from within to lay gracefully on the bed. "Pick one to wear," he orders,

flourishing his wrist to signal to the garments. "And bring the remaining two with you."

He holds up his hand, silencing my disagreement before I can give it. "Let me explain," he says, grinning. "The vampires will not like seeing you in church garbs. While they know who you are and what you are, among civilians, no one will know your true identity. It will cause less trouble for all of us."

"Why must I start today? We have two airships to take before we reach Vexsis."

"You aren't accustomed to wearing them. I imagine you'll be like a toddler tugging at your collar and sleeves all day. Better to get used to wearing them now rather than later."

He nods his head at the suits, silently requesting that I pick one. Grabbing one of the suits, I hold it against me. The fabric feels strange. When I happen to catch my reflection in the mirror, I don't recognize the man staring back at me. He's exhausted and confused by a damn suit that somehow makes him feel like another person. Someone he isn't sure he can be or should be or wants to be or who the fuck is he?

"I can call for a butler if you need assistance changing, although I also wouldn't mind attending to your needs," Lore says, bringing my gaze back to him. His smirk falls, likely because I am not giving him the usual reactions.

"I'll change on my own." I head towards the bathroom, unaware if Lore leaves or not.

Trying not to catch my reflection, I hastily change. The buttons are annoying. The sleeves are annoying. The collar is annoying. As Lore said, I'm like a toddler tugging on everything. When I step out of the bathroom, Lore chuckles.

"Stand still," he orders, stepping over to adjust just about everything. The tip of his fingers graze my neck when he adjusts my collar, then he gently

holds my wrist while ensuring the buttons or cufflinks or whatever the fuck they're called look right.

"There." He claps his hands, admiring me head to toe. "Lordship suits you. You should consider marrying one."

Even my foul mood can't keep the blush at bay for that rather aggressive comment.

Lore doesn't add to that. Instead, donning his impish grin, he gestures at the door. "Finish packing and meet me downstairs, Your Lordship."

Rolling my eyes, I return to packing while wishing the heat simmering in my face would die down. It's just his normal teasing, but I'm sweating way more than usual. I shouldn't sweat at all! Especially considering what will be happening; sharing a room. I won't even have privacy and Lore will... be Lore. Resigning myself to this horrendous fate, I finish packing the stupid suits and head downstairs. The children surround Lore, Draven, and Cyan, giving each hugs. Lore gets kisses though.

I stand back clutching my suitcase and waiting to leave. Then Nalo walks up to me. "Have a safe trip," he says and hugs my waist.

I don't really know how to respond so I pat his back, hating myself for being so damn awkward. "Oh, um, thanks... be good for Arline?"

"No way, she needs someone to keep her on her toes," Nalo whispers, then runs off giggling.

I'm further confused when Oliver comes over next, followed by Angel and Ashby. Oliver is first in line, holding up his arms in a clear declaration to pick him up. I do so and am further confused by him hugging my neck.

"Bye-bye, Seren." He leans in to whisper in my ear. "Tell Papa to get a dog while he's out."

I laugh. "I'll try to convince him."

The line continues with more surprising hugs from all the children, save for Darika. She merely comes up to pat me on the arm and states plainly, "Try not to die."

"I will do my best."

Isabell's next to us. She tugs on my jacket. "But if you do die, can I have your axe?"

"Absolutely not! You could hurt yourself." I scold her, then flinch at my own tone that Isabell did not miss.

She snorts. "Okay, Mom."

Then pushes herself away with Darika following her while saying, "You know, if he is dead he can't enforce that so, like, you could still keep his axe."

Isabell pumps her fist in the air. "Awesome!"

"Alright, kiddo's, it's time for us to go," Lore calls. Draven and Cyan have already stepped out the door. "Behave while I'm gone."

A series of "we will" echo in the hall. I follow Lore out the door, feeling a bit overwhelmed by all the children saying goodbye and even hugging me. I never thought that would happen. As I look back at the door to see the younger ones waving and wishing us good luck, I may choke up a bit as I think; *this is what a real family is meant to look like.*

All of us get into the car. Draven drives. Cyan sits in the passenger seat. I'm forced to ride in the back with Lore, who reminds us again of the rules. No going anywhere alone, yada, yada, yada. We're relatively quiet on the car ride to the station. The closer we get, the louder the world becomes. The airship engines roar overhead until they're blaring in our ears.

Draven parks the car. We step out to be assaulted by smog and sound. People scurry around the station wider than four blocks of the city. There's endless entrances and drop off locations from left to right. Giant metal

beams hold up the archway that we pass through into a crowded station, similar to a train station. Benches line the lobby in front of the booths where some hurry to get tickets. Draven declares we already have ours. We merely wait at the designation gate until our airship is called.

I'm not sure why now the nerves truly settle in. As the four of us sit together waiting for the airship, I finally realize this is actually happening. We're heading to the capital where, according to Lore, we'll have to wait a day to board the ship into Vexsis. There are so many protocols that it's rare that people don't have to wait. I could visit Trinia Cathedral while we're there. Maybe see Jakoby and Olere, ask a couple questions?

My grip tightens on my luggage.

"Seren, are you feeling alright?" Lore asks, startling me. He leans over, concern etched into his features. "You've been acting odd the last few days."

"I'm fine," I lie to which he cocks a disbelieving brow. "I'm fine," I reiterate, wishing I could convince Lore and myself.

Our airship number is called. I don't know if it's really a rescue, but we join the hustle of the crowd momentarily. At the gate, Draven hands our tickets over and we're taken through a special line for aristocrats, I suppose. Everyone's dressed to impress so I guess it is a good thing I'm wearing a suit.

The guide takes us through a metal container to a terrace connected to a giant airship bronze in color. The giant propellers on the side sit idly while steam rises from the hissing pipes covering the exterior. At the top of the airship are the rooms and board, decorated in golden trim and lined by windows so we can see the view, but they're barely viewable from the terrace.

When a heavy metal door opens on the side, we finally enter the airship to begin our journey to Vexsis.

Phew, Seren's all over the place, isn't he? But he seems to be heading in the right direction... right? ;) And the children tried to give him a nice goodbye, some of them lol Will Seren be alright like this on his way to Vexsis? How do you think everything is going to play out?

53. Unexpected Sleeping Arrangements

Cyan P.O.V.

Lore has us drive or take the train for our assignments; they're harder to track. So the first and only time I rode a first class airship was when Lore adopted me and brought me to Silra from the capital. At the time, I was too terrified to leave my room, suspecting the church would send someone after us to kill me. Lore spent most of his time coddling me, which admittedly worked. I didn't panic to the point of madness, just extreme exhaustion. He carried me around a lot during those travels, kinda like a saggy sack of luggage.

Seren and I gawk at the lounge area of the airship. We stand within a dome of shimmering glass. Beautiful plants and sparkling water fountains cover the area. Seating arrangements made of plump and ghastly designed cushions sit nestled among the lounge. Already, a few Lords, Ladies, and Lieges sit among the splendor laughing and drinking wine brought to them on silver trays.

Draven tugs the sleeve of my shirt to remind me to follow them. We pass through halls with equally as questionable wallpaper. Nobles have an obsession with flower-esque designs. Personally, I think that's very Grandma-esque.

Without my knowledge, Draven has taken my luggage to put in our rooms. I'm too busy observing the surroundings to remember where our rooms are. Now we're heading to have an early lunch under the sky. The engines kick on beneath our feet. My stomach flip flops as we ascend at the same time servers bring our food.

"This is a meal?" Seren asks. For once, I am on the same page as him. We both scowl at the meager salad they brought out.

"No, this is one part of an eight course meal," Lore explains.

"For lunch? By the time we finish, it'll be dinner time," I say, earning a chuckle from Lore.

"Trust the process and enjoy."

Enjoy, I do, because, even if the portions are small, the taste is huge. Draven gives a few warning looks when my silverware clinks against the plate or I drop food on the plate. However, I'm not alone this time. Seren flinches when he almost drops his wine glass. Draven sighs and lowers his head while Lore eats like we aren't even here.

"Lord Seymour, is that you?" a man calls from nearby when we've been served the final part of the meal. Lore peers over his shoulder at a man who approaches him donning a kind smile, but he keeps a fair distance from us. "It's a pleasure to see you again. Last we met was at the Annual Hunt of Rugby, I believe?"

Lore nods. "Indeed it was, Lord Brand. How are the wife and kids?"

"Good, good. Those three have sprouted like weeds! It was nice seeing you." Lord Brand nods, then scurries back to his seat.

"Is it normal for people to waltz up to you for a brief chat in the middle of a meal?" I ask.

"With me, yes," Lore replies nonchalantly. "As you can see, others choose to dine together. They merely want to greet me to save face and run."

"Isn't it more rude to feign pleasantries?" Seren mumbles under his breath. He stiffens when Lore pats his hand.

"Oh, my sweet Seren, are you upset?" Lore teases. "I would be flattered if you got upset in my stead."

Seren swats Lore's hand away. "Not even in your wildest dreams."

I take a glance at Draven, who shrugs. No doubt he thinks the same; Lore's taking his jokes a bit too far. Seren has been acting strange ever since we talked too. He hasn't questioned me further. In fact, he hasn't talked to anyone until today. Even now, he eats quietly with his head down like he hopes no one will notice him. I thought he might approach me, ask a few more questions, but he hasn't. He's taking time to think, to process; I know the feeling.

After lunch, we take a short tour of the airship. Then Lore announces he bought us tickets to see a play. I've never been to one so I end up fidgeting next to Draven the whole time, even if the show does pique my interest. I'm simply not the greatest and keeping still. A few times, Draven rests his hand on my arm to whisper, "Am I going to have to take you for a walk?"

"Ha-ha," I spit back at him., wishing to do something totally asinine like hold his hand or ask him to put his arm around me. The play's even a damn romance, so when the leads kiss my gaze drifts to Draven. I recall the moment our lips touched and my stomach squirms.

Stop it, Cyan.

Our first day on the airship passes in a flash. Before I realize it, it's late and Draven has escorted us back to our rooms. I watch Lore open the door, grinning madly as a reluctant Seren steps inside. I'm about to follow when Draven taps my shoulder.

"We're in here," he states, pointing at the room next door.

"We?" I hiccup.

"Yes." Draven opens the door. Like Seren, I'm as reluctant to enter, staring at our nice room that would feel spacious if not for Draven entering behind me. Did someone turn up the heat? It's the middle of summer. The air should be on, but I'm sweating buckets over here.

"Why the hell are *we* sharing a room?" I ask. "His Grace shouldn't be alone with that murderous muttonhead! Especially after he has been acting so weird."

Cursing, I pivot on my heel to face Draven. Although he listens, he doesn't have a hint of care in his eyes while I freak out, "What if Seren tries something? What if he takes this opportunity to hurt His Grace? What if he has some freakish new spell or invention from the church that will kill him?"

My suggestions hang in the air. The longer they do, the more Draven smirks until he outright snorts rather uncharacteristically. He presses the back of his hand to his mouth, muttering, "That's impossible."

"Which part? Seren attacking His Grace or the church inventing a vampire killing machine?"

Draven shrugs. "Both. Regardless, this is what His Grace wanted."

"To bother Seren more?"

"Most likely." Draven approaches his side of the room. His luggage sits on his bed. He opens it to pull out sleepwear.

"Do you also think he's taking it too far?" I ask.

"I trust that he knows what he's doing."

I mock him. Draven rolls eyes, then has the audacity to ask, "Does it bother you that much to share a room with me? If that is the case, I can move down to the servants quarters without bothering His Grace to retrieve the papers. There is more than likely an open room."

"What? No! I didn't say anything like that. I'm fine sleeping with you!"

And I'd like to take this moment to say; I deserve whatever punishments are coming my way for I am an absolute fool. The biggest fool of all fools. There should be an award ceremony where I'm thrown into a bit of mud for this foolishness.

I stare at Draven. He stares at me. The temperature skyrockets, which I'm sure only applies to me. Then the bullshit comes fumbling out of my mouth, "I-I meant that--that I'm fine sleeping i-in a room with you."

Nodding, Draven steps around our beds, never offering me another glance, to disappear in the bathroom. I hear the water turn on. Not good because the water being on means he's showering and showering means he's naked and... oh no.

I throw myself onto the bed, hoping to smother myself with a pillow.

I'm fine sleeping with you? Way to go, jackass! You couldn't be more obvious about shit you aren't even capable of. And now Draven's probably wishing I did ask him to sleep in the servant's quarters. Why would he want to stay here with me? The weirdo who made sexual implications towards someone way out of his league. Fuck!

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Aw, Cyan, we all have a slip of the tongue. It's okay lol Will these two be able to share a room without anything ~happening~?

54. Provocative Smiles

Seren P.O.V.

I barely got a wink of sleep after sharing a room with Lore. He's always annoying, but last night I also feared he'd be deadly. Either by physically stabbing me or metaphorically stabbing me because, damn it all, he's hot when he sleeps too. And I'm a fucking creepy for noticing it.

At breakfast, we take our seats where I first notice Cyan. Deep bags sag beneath his eyes and those eyes glare at me.

"Good morning everyone," Lore says, directing his attention towards Cyan, who stabs his breakfast sandwich with a fork.

"What are you doing?" Draven whispers.

Cyan, without missing a beat, takes a bite of that sandwich still impaled by his fork like that's a normal way to eat sandwiches. He speaks between bites, "Mornin'." And never replies to Draven.

Lore eats like nothing is wrong. Draven and I share concerned passing glances, then equally surprised scoffs that we dared to share the same feeling even for a second.

"How did everyone sleep?" Lore asks as if one hasn't already answered that with a mere glance.

"More than fine, Your Grace. The beds were very comfortable," Draven answers.

Nodding, Lore continues eating. I'm struggling to do so because Cyan won't stop staring at me. He's about to burn a hole through my skull! Could it be that he didn't sleep well knowing Lore and I shared a room? Cyan continues to distrust me. Perhaps he worried that I would try to harm Lore. If that's the

case, we can't continue like this. Cyan should share the room with Lore instead!

...purely because of that, not because I actually rather share a room with Draven because there is no temptation.

When breakfast ends, Lore insists on seeing more of the ship. We'll be passing the countryside and, apparently, we can get a beautiful view from one of the terraces. He begins to guide us there when I tap Cyan's shoulder.

"What?" Cyan barks around a yawn.

"I understand why you had a rough night," I say, causing Cyan to curl his nose. "I want you to know that the rooms were not my idea. I rather not share a room with His Grace either so, if it would make you more comfortable, I am more than happy to switch rooms."

Cyan stares at me for a long moment, then guffaws and walks away.

Is that a yes or a no?

We reach the desired terrace. As Lore expressed, the view is incredible. The clouds hover above us as the land passes below. Square fields patch the ground to appear as a giant, green quilt. Cyan presses his nose to the glass. Draven takes firm hold of the collar of his shirt to prevent him from ramming his head against the glass when the airship jostles.

"Lord Seymour!" A woman suddenly calls, turning all our attention to her. She shuffles over wearing an exuberant yellow dress that dances around her feet.

"Miss Harmony," Lore says, immediately taking her hand to kiss.

I'm mildly surprised Miss Harmony giggles. She's mortal, but apparently doesn't dislike the attention of a dhampir.

"It has been some time since I've seen you. You're more beautiful than last we met," Lore adds, donning a provocative grin.

I--he--I'm right here! I mean, *we're* right here.

Miss Harmony giggles, obviously delighted by his compliment. "And you're as charming as ever. Time never changes you a bit."

"Even if it did, I would still always appreciate your pretty face."

She hides her smile behind a fan that she soon uses to cool her warm cheeks. Stepping closer, she links her arm with Lore's as if they've done this before. Based on their flirtatious grins, I'd say they have, and likely much more.

My stomach aches.

"May I ask what is taking you to the capital and who makes up your company?" She continues, nodding towards us.

"Of course, I am traveling to Vexsis for business matters. This here is Seren, Draven, and Cyan, a few workers of my estate."

I offer Lore a glare, disliking being referred to as a worker even if it's unlikely she'd believe I was a paladin nor does she actually need to know. Draven bows respectfully like the refined butler he is. Cyan roughly mirrors him while I merely offer her a nod.

"Everyone, this is Miss Juliette Harmony. She's a fine lady of Silra whose family often helps in some of my business ventures," Lore says, then tugs Miss Harmony a tad closer. He leans in to whisper something in her ear, grinning devilishly.

Miss Harmony covers her expression with her fan, though it does little to shield the spark in her eyes. Whatever he said, she agreed with a curt nod.

"I find it only fitting that I escort Miss Harmony today as thanks for all the work her family has done and, frankly, I quite enjoy her company." He said company like he meant something else and Miss Harmony caught it, based on her smile.

"I expect the three of you to be capable of handling yourselves today," Lore adds, glancing between us. I bite the insides of my cheek to refrain from making any form of expression. He walks away, keeping Miss Harmony close. He said he'd "escort her," but they're heading back in the direction of the bedrooms.

"Oh!" Cyan suddenly shouts, bringing our attention to him. He has smacked his fist against the palm of his head in realization. "I remember her now, she wanted me to buy handcuffs once."

"Handcuffs?" I repeat. Cyan stares wide-eyed at me. Draven sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Uh... you misheard me," Cyan declares, pivoting on his heel to walk away.

I certainly did not mishear and, coupled with what happened until now, it's obvious what kind of *business relationship* Lore has with Miss Juliette Harmony. Whatever, he can conduct *business* however he wishes. I don't give a damn who he sleeps with or what they're into because it isn't my concern. Who cares? I definitely don't.

Cyan returns to admiring the view, at least until he notices me.

"Stop that," he declares.

"What?" I grumble, arms crossed so tightly they make my chest hurt.

"Glaring," he replies. "Do you have super vision and you can see a vampire all the way down there? It's weird."

"I'm not glaring."

"It's a miracle you haven't melted the glass."

"Stop being so fucking dramatic."

"Whoa, okay." Cyan raises his hands in feigned defeat. He spins to approach Draven, saying loud enough for me to hear. "Someone's moody, don't you think?"

"I'm not moody!"

"That's what someone in a mood would say."

"Ugh!" Throwing my hands up, I'm about to stomp away when the airship has another hiccup. This time much bigger, although nothing to worry about. The ship sways slightly. I grasp the handle by the windows, keeping myself steady. Cyan isn't so lucky.

He stumbles forward, almost falling onto his face when Draven grasps his waist. They fumble over each other's feet, sending Draven against the wall. He barely keeps them both up, tightly gripping Cyan, who slowly raises his head. I catch the moment when Cyan's cheeks flush vibrant red. Draven swallows so visibly that I swear I even hear him gulp. Then he releases Cyan like hot iron.

"Sorry," Draven declares.

"I-It's fine." Cyan power walks down the hall.

I grin. That was *interesting* . And perfect timing. It's so much better to bother someone else rather than be bothered. Scurrying after Cyan, I ask, "What was that?"

He twists his nose. "What was what?"

"Just now. With Draven." I gesture over our shoulder towards the shadow who seems to follow everyone he's with, not just Lore. "He caught you like a real life Prince Charming--"

Cyan scoffs.

"And you are still red." I point at his face that he rubs his hand against.

"I am not. You're hallucinating, probably to make yourself feel better about seeing His Grace walk off with a woman." Cyan grins at how he immediately put a scowl on my face. "I bet you're telling yourself you're seeing weird shit today as a way to cope with your sudden lack of attention."

"Don't try to change the subject. There's something going on with you and Draven, isn't there?" I point back at the accused, who glares at me like I stabbed him.

"There's something going on with you and His Grace, isn't there?" Cyan fires back.

"Absolutely not," I declare. Cyan doesn't buy it. He guffaws and heads down a set of stairs to a terrace below. Draven follows, keeping a close eye on him.

I stand at the top of the stairs like I'm waiting for someone. Glancing back over my shoulder, I can't deny that I'm disappointed finding myself alone. I almost expected Lore to be there...

Whatever, like I fucking care what he does. Or who he does.

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sniff, sniff* I smell jealousy, but also Seren is catching on to Cyan and Draven's not so secretive thing! How is Seren going to handle his jealousy? If you're curious, you can read 15 episodes ahead on my patreon, as well as a few extra chapters such as detailed backstory and perhaps a non-canon NSFW episode *sips tea

55. The Growing Abyss

I do not see Lore until after dinner. He discovers me in the lounge alone because Cyan got tired of me being "moody." So he said. Frankly, I believe he wanted to spend more alone time with Draven. They scurried off to who knows where. I didn't see them at dinner either. I'd say they were having an evening under the sheets too, if I wasn't very aware of Cyan's aversion to touch.

Now, here I sit, watching Lore strut over to me like he wasn't having handcuffed sex with Miss Harmony. Fuck, now I'm thinking about Lore having sex. Get that out of your head, Seren!

I heave a long breath, attempting to compose myself before he arrives. The moment he's near, I'm affronted by the aroma of shampoo. Though his clothes and hair remain well kept, there is no denying what happened. My toes curl so tightly that they ache. Even my jaw starts to hurt from the constant grinding of my teeth. Foolish.

"Seren, why are you alone?" Lore asks, sitting on the couches practically made of clouds. Soft music plays from the small orchestra along the edge of the dance floor. A few have started to dance, enjoying the sun setting as the stars sparkle over the small glass ceiling overhead.

"I imagine the answer would be because I want to be alone," I snap, earning a puzzled expression from Lore.

"Are you implying that you want me to leave?"

"I would also imagine that, yes, I am."

Lore chuckles. He rests his elbow on the back of the couch, allowing his knuckles to press against his temple, keeping his head up. His eyes meet mine.

"You didn't enjoy the airship's amenities today?" he asks.

"I don't know what would give you that impression," I bite, figuratively and literally, chewing on a treat that I snatched from a tray carried by one of the few butlers walking around the lounge. "I quite enjoyed my day. How was yours?"

I shouldn't have asked that. I'm acting immature, and for no good reason. Why am I rattled? I shouldn't be. Who cares what he did!

Lore takes wine offered to him by one of the butlers. Smirking over the rim, he replies, "My day was rather invigorating."

But I can't stop myself from spitting, "I bet. Did you stop by our room to bathe or did you use hers after the two of you were done?"

"Dare I say it, but that tone makes me believe that you're feeling jealous." Lore leans in to brush the tips of his fingers against my cheek. I hate the thought that he had done the same to someone else. I swat his hand away. Lore chuckles. "If you wish to spend time with me so badly, all you have to do is ask."

"Jealous?" I scoff, wishing the heat in my cheeks would subside. "What would I be jealous of? I'm merely confused that a mortal would be so open and eager to perform such activities with you."

"Such activities," he repeats, swirling the wine in his glass. "Are paladins not allowed to talk about sex or is that specific to you?"

My throat becomes abnormally parched, more barren than a desert. Here I go again thinking about Lore having sex. I try to get the imagery out of my head.

"Or, perhaps, you don't want to talk about sex when I'm involved?" Lore adds, leaning in so every word grows nearer until I feel his lips brush my ear. "Because that may invoke thoughts of sex *with* me, which you, a paladin of the Holy Church, would *never* imagine. Right, my sweet Seren?"

Sweat forms on my palms. An abyss opens within me, seeking for an answer it has been desperate to find. I feel the desperation and confusion

skittering like spiders through my veins, stretching further and further until they reach my mind. There, they burrow themselves into my consciousness, picking and prodding at every sinful thought. They flash before my eyes as faded pictures; click, click, click. Then I blink and they're gone, but Lore remains. Smirking. Close. The scent of shampoo and his fingers dancing over my cheek.

"Right, I would never," I speak calmly, somehow collected in my moment of insanity. Lore watches intently, gaze drifting over my form in a slow, fluid movement. Then he catches my stare, almost daring me to say more, to trip up and admit a terrifying truth.

Then he stands, outstretching his hand to me. "Dance with me," he orders more than says, keeping close so that, should I stand, we'll be chest to chest.

"Find Miss Harmony to dance with," I reply, even if the mere thought of it makes me want to kick about like an angry toddler.

"I'd rather dance with you."

"And yet you left me earlier to be with her."

"I've made a horrible decision. Won't you forgive me, darling?" He teases, flicking his fingers in a come hither manner. "Come on."

"Because you'd love for someone I know to see a paladin dancing with a dhampir. How foolish do you think I am?"

"Have you seen another member of the church here?" Lore argues, looking left to right. "I've yet to see any and you are not in your church garbs. No one will recognize you. Dance with me, Seren."

The same answer rests on the tip of my tongue, but then I spot a familiar yellow dress. Miss Harmony steps into my peripheral. She turns her head towards us. I told Lore to dance with her instead, but--

"Fine," I grunt, surging to my feet.

Lore takes my hand, holding tight to drag me towards the dance floor. "Don't be shy," he says, reaching for my waist. "I'll teach you a few steps first."

"Don't be cocky," I reply, smacking his hand away to grab his waist instead. Lore's puzzled gaze meets mine when he rests a hand on my shoulder. I grasp his other hand and lead us into perfect synchronization with those around us. Lore offers an impressed stare that I roll my eyes at.

"The church has a few upscale functions, you should know that. As a paladin, I am expected to attend and partake. I learned dancing etiquette when I was quite young so I'm rather good at it," I explain, smirking at Lore's continued surprise.

"So you've had a few dance partners?" He asks. I try not to shiver when his hand slithers to my neck. His thumb rests over my pulse. He has to notice.

"Obviously."

"Ah." Lore steps closer. The space between us becomes practically nonexistent, leading me to gaze up into blue eyes that even the ocean's beauty couldn't rival. "Is this your attempt at payback? Making me jealous now at the thought of you being like this with another."

"Like this?" I echo, wishing I didn't sound so breathless, wishing I could look away.

"Being close, enjoying ourselves, regardless of whether we're meant to," he replies. I feel his fingers slip between mine, locking them. "Are you enjoying yourself?" he whispers, leaning in so the strands of his hair tickle my cheeks. "Be honest."

Honest?

Honestly, I'm slipping far away from what I've always known and the unknown terrifies me, but...

"I'm enjoying myself," I whisper, rewarded by a smile Lore hasn't shown before. A gentle smile, neither teasing or provocative, simple and sweet and breathtaking. He'd rule the world over a thousand times if he showed that more often.

His forehead rests against mine. I breathe in his scent. The hand on my neck slips into my hair. Then I panic.

Lore grunts when I shove him aside. I hurry away from the dance floor, heart racing so vigorously I feel the beat from head to toe. I throw open our bedroom door, stampeding inside to hide myself in the bathroom incase Lore followed. Not that I can escape him or this overwhelming sensation dragging me into that abyss, the one still in my gut. I fear it'll rip me apart, tear me limb from limb until something or someone unrecognizable remains.

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Just a note because it happened on Tapas and I can't believe I have to say this; if any of y'all try to make it seem like what Lore did is disgusting, I will mute you. They're consenting adults. He's allowed to have sex and he shouldn't have to hide all day like he did something wrong because he didn't. Get over it.

Anyway, I've got wonderful news ^_^

The second and final volume of the audiobook for Reborn as the Villain's Lackey (available as a novel on Tapas) is now available wherever audiobooks are sold! This is a super big achievement that feels surreal because I never imagined I'd have audiobooks. If you or someone you know prefers audiobooks, give this a try. We have a wonderful narrator who sounds absolutely incredible and it's a fun story that I think many of you will love! Thanks for all the support and, if you're interested, I've left an external link to the Recorded Books site. The link is also on my dashboard. It will have some options on where to purchase the audiobook so choose whichever works for you! If you're having trouble finding volume one or two, let me know and I'll try to help.

56. Seren's Only Family

If Lore was bothered by my sudden departure and obvious avoidance, he makes no mention of it. By the time he arrives in our room, I'm already laying in bed. He doesn't attempt to wake me. In fact, he's oddly silent, trying to get into his own bed without making a fuss. In a way, I'm grateful. In another, I wish he wouldn't be considerate. *Wake me. Tell me I'm a mess. Ask if I'm alright. Tease me like you always do.* Something to ease this constant anxiety.

Sleep doesn't grant me any release either. I dream of Lore, the two of us dancing without a care. He smiles at me, like he did earlier. He rests his forehead against mine. I feel his lips and want another, then I wake up in a cold sweat.

Lore sleeps on the bed across from me, oblivious to what he has caused; disruption. Disruption of my life and all I've ever known.

So when morning comes, I'm desperate to escape, although the form at which the Holy Mothers provided is not what I had hoped...

Lore awakes with a start from the loud ruckus outside our door. I'm half dressed in my robes, having done so quietly in hopes not to wake him and hear his complaints about my attire. These robes make me feel safe, protected from the outside world. I had hoped wearing them would ease me, but that momentary comfort vanishes as the noises grow louder outside. There's even a terrified scream.

I hurry out the door in search of the commotion. Some people stand within the hall, hugging one another. Others dash through the halls in the direction of the lounge. When I arrive, there's a crowd formed around the dance floor; the one Lore and I were at last night.

"Excuse me," I say, gently nudging my way through the crowd. People step away easily, allowing me to see what has caused the horror. At the center of

the dance floor, a priestess lays dead, drained entirely of blood. Golden nails, like those from a railroad, impale her palms and feet. She's sprawled atop the Red Moon's symbol; a horizontal, red crescent moon impaled by a golden sword. The perpetrator wrote a message beside her; *Another will follow. Soon.*

"Not trying to hide themselves, are they?" Lore asks, appearing beside me.

"No, they are not, unless this is another trying to make the Red Moon seem at fault," I reply, somewhat hating how relaxed I am. This is my element. I know what to do, so I break away from the crowd to speak with what I perceive to be the captain. She wears a uniform slightly different from the others, medals adorning her vest.

"Are you the captain?" I inquire.

She faces me, frustrated until she notices who, or rather what I am.

"Paladin, what an honor, though I wish this to be under better circumstances," she whispers, pressing a hand over her chest where I imagine the Holy Mother's necklace lies. "Yes, I am Captain Reggie. I am relieved that you're here. I had just requested a log of visitors in case there were other members of the church on board."

"Good, we have to find them and warm them. It's likely that will be the next target," I reply.

Reggie's gaze turns to Lore behind me.

"This is Lord Lore Seymour of Silra," I introduce him, causing Reggie to bow her head in respect.

"If you would be alright with it, I want to help," I add, glancing at the priestess who's expression of fear remains frozen on her face. She peers heavenward, eyes dull and mouth agape in terror. I've long forgotten how many others I've seen in such a state, those I lost during vampire rebellions or a vampire high on blood lust. One minute you're speaking to someone, and the next you'll never hear them again.

"We would be honored to have your assistance," she replies, then frowns. "But what if you are the next target?"

"That's unlikely," Lore interjects. "I bought our tickets under my name and Seren came dressed as a lord. Seeing as this had to have been planned for them to kill her, bring the body here, and set this up without being caught, I doubt they knew a paladin was on board, otherwise this plan would have been postponed."

"Unless they're cocky or capable," Reggie counters. "As captain, it is my duty to protect everyone on this ship. That includes you, no matter how much I know you're capable of handling yourself, Sir Paladin."

"I appreciate the concern, and I assure you that nothing will happen to you should something go wrong. Please, allow me to search for the killers. There's no way they have disembarked yet and, as the one with the most training here, I am more likely to find them expeditiously. Should your officers approach a vampire or dhampir without proper care or do not find them in time, someone else will die. It's in the nature of these beasts to bring about pain and death. They can't help themselves," I say what I've likely said in some version a thousand times, but this is the first where my stomach sinks at the words.

My gaze shifts to Lore. His own attention already rests on me. I taste his disappointment, see it swimming within his eyes. Then he looks away, maintaining a calm expression that worsens the chill nipping at my lungs. They ache for air. I take a breath that tastes stale. I should apologize, but what is there to say? What do I want to say? That I... that I don't believe that anymore?

Do I?

"I will assist in this endeavor as well," Lore adds. "I've consistently worked alongside local law enforcement in Silra. We've stumbled upon members of the Red Moon before."

Reggie hesitates once more, but when she hears the fearful cries of the crowd, she sighs. "So be it," she says. "You may help, but you must assure

me that you will call for backup, should you find the assailants."

"We will," I say, taking the walkie talkies she hands us. She explains how to use them, then allows Lore and I to examine the crime scene.

Reggie and the other officers keep back the crowd and put up a tent to hide the priestess. I'm examining the bite marks riddling her neck when Lore says, "I stand by what I said; I will help find who did this, however, I will not eagerly behead them in front of a crowd. That will be your job, great Paladin of the Holy Church."

"I never expected it to be your job, hypocritical lord," I bite in response.

"Hypocritical? Do explain that."

"You killed Ikehn in front of a crowd," I remind him, standing to move around the priestess. "And you seemed rather proud of yourself."

"He attacked us with a spell that would have killed everyone nearby."

"Do you think those who did this won't attack and kill us? And need I remind you about that?" I point at the warning written beside her. "They *will* kill someone else."

"Don't try to make yourself feel better when we both know the truth; you just want to kill them because that's all you know how to do, Seren," he accuses. "Those like me, we're just monsters who can't control ourselves, right? And you are the paladin, a weapon of the church to dispose of us, as incapable of controlling yourselves too."

I wish I had a response to that, but no words filter through my mouth. Then guards come running over.

"Paladin!" One calls, staring wide-eyed at me. "The other priest on board, he isn't in his room. We can't find him."

I look at Lore, who brushes by me to whisper, "It appears you got your wish. The monster is on the move. You better find it, Paladin of the Holy Church."

My hands clench into fists. I expect Lore to leave, but he doesn't. He stands beside me, arms crossed and gaze forward, waiting for someone to give a command.

"Let's go," I bite, charging forward. The guards express that they checked the priest's room and there were signs of a struggle. When we arrive at the room, I don't find any blood or blight. They captured the priest without biting him, but there's no telling what they're doing to him now.

"We'll have to split up. Lore and I will check here," I say, pointing at the map one of the officers laid out of the airship. I split the rest of them up into groups of three, then we're off to scour the ship.

Lore and I never say a word until about an hour into our search.

"Over there," he says, nodding his head towards a maintenance tunnel beneath the guest areas above. There are hundreds of them around the ship. Anyone without a map or prior knowledge could get lost in this maze so that's why we checked here first. There's no better place to hide.

"Did you hear something?" I whisper to which he nods and holds a finger to his lips, silencing me.

Lore guides us through a few more tunnels. There's a wall of pipes with barely enough space for Lore to squeeze through. I follow, biting back a yelp from the heat of the pipes that nearly burn my skin. Then I hear it, the soft groans of a man. My feet carry me faster to a small nook behind the pipes, like a storage space, but the vampires are using it to feed. One holds the priest in his grasp, digging into his neck while the other drinks from his wrist. Though I've witnessed this before, the sight still makes my blood curdle.

I lunge forward in one swift movement, beheading one vampire instantaneously. The other gasps in horror, his red eyes taking in my form and realization settles in. He doesn't bother defending. He wants to escape. Throwing the limp priest at me, he disappears. An illusion? Invisibility? Teleportation? I'm not sure.

"See? I was right!" I growl at Lore, lifting the priest into my arms. My hardened gaze fixates on the dhampir, who stands listlessly behind me. "I have to kill these monsters to protect my family!" The words won't stop even as I see Lore's expression darken. "I'm a paladin! This is my *purpose* in life!"

"Determined by who?" Lore counters without a beat and my stomach knots.

"I don't have time for this." I hurry past him, focusing on saving the priest first. My family. My *only* family.

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Oh buddy, things are getting tense between Seren and Lore again... how is all this going to play out? I know this isn't everyone's favorite story of mine, but seriously, I'm having so much fun with it. I don't really know why. Maybe because I'm doing whatever the hell I want, regardless of whether it'll perform well? Idk, but yeah, this is fun!

57. Darkness

After dropping the priest off in the infirmary, I call for backup as the captain instructed. However, chaos erupts on the ship. I hear the noise from the infirmary and follow the frantic calls. Whatever trait this vampire has, there's a time limit. I catch a glimpse of him reappearing among the crowd. People shriek in terror. When he realizes I have found him, he claws the nearest bystander. A woman screams when his talons slice her arm. Then he attempts to attack another. A seraphic who manages to conjure a shield that makes the vampire stumble. He lurches forward, becoming a flash of color among the crowd.

Like our time in Silra against Ikehn, I have limited options. There are too many bystanders. Offensive attacks could set the ship ablaze and send us crashing to the ground. Civilians scurry in all directions like frightened mice escaping the paws of a hungry cat. They don't know how to watch or dodge danger. One wrong move and I may hit them instead of the vampire. I may send us to our doom, so I have to be careful. Calculated.

Leaning down, I make a swift cast that allows me to sprint towards the wall. Gravity means nothing to me, though the cast causes an awful headache. Without anyone in my way, I barrel across the wall faster and faster until the vampire is in reach. He howls in pain when the blade of my axe catches his shoulder.

I jump off the wall, digging my axe deeper to drag him away from the crowd. He snatches the handle, trying to use brute strength to break it. He soon realizes that's impossible. Pressing his heels to the ground, he lurches upwards. My axe releases in a spray of red. He flips over me, landing behind. I kick my leg out. He jumps to avoid being tripped. A clawed hand grasps my robe. My weapon clatters to the floor when I release it. He tries to bring me towards him, fangs bared. My fingers dig into his wrist. My heels dig into the floor. I fling him over me like an empty sack, then slam my foot into his throat. He gasps for breath.

I release him to retrieve my axe, but the blade meets the metal floor rather than his throat. He has risen once more, and disappeared. My eyes scan the small lounge area. One would think people would have the sense to run, but the saying is true; curiosity killed the cat. Many remain on the outskirts, near what they think will be safe exits, in order to watch. Worried about who he may attack next, my gaze drifts to the onlookers. Odd movement catches my eye. The slight discoloration, almost a distortion in the air sprinting towards the exit.

I throw my axe. The vampire reappears, screaming with my axe embedded in his back. He falls to the floor, howling like a wounded animal. And that's when the people start shouting; *"Kill it, Paladin! Kill the beast!"*

My hesitation to do exactly as the crowd wants nearly costs a man his life. The vampire grabs his wrist, prepared to bite. My legs swiftly carry me. I grab the vampire's hair, remove my axe and slice his head clean off. Blood sprays over the man, who gags and stumbles back in horror. But the remaining onlookers are unaffected by the morbid display. They cheer. Louder. And louder. And louder. Until their words ring in my ears more powerful than morning church bells.

The room sways in my vision. The crowd cheers for the death of another monster. Some even step closer in grim curiosity. I haven't felt sick after a kill since the first few I took. But now, it takes all my willpower not to hurl as I push past the crowd. At some point, I think I tell security about the body. I'm not really sure. I stumble through the halls in search of the infirmary to check in on the priest. That's all I want to think about. Not about the body I left behind, the one others cheered me to make.

When I arrive at the infirmary, nurses have already tied the priest to the bed. He thrashes about wildly, practically foaming at the mouth. The bite marks are inflamed like wicked burns. His veins bulge in his neck to his forehead, face so red that he looks like a popped cherry.

"Paladin," someone says, bringing my horrified gaze to them. The doctor approaches me, frowning. "I know you likely wish to speak to your brother but, as you can see, he is in no condition to do so."

"Do you think he'll survive?" I ask, making the situation worse for myself by looking at him once more.

The priest's eyes roll into the back of his head. He heaves a long breath, then screams like someone has set him ablaze. Tears follow, accompanied by the familiar begging; "More! I need more! Don't keep it from me! I-I can't stand it! It hurts! It hurts!"

"He's having a very severe reaction," the doctor replies. "We need to be realistic about this."

In other words, it's unlikely he'll survive.

When the priest begins to spasm, the doctor runs towards him. She and the nurses struggle to slip a reed into his mouth to prevent him from biting his own tongue. The sound of his pained breath. The screeching metal of the bed. The clinking of the restraints. They torture my mind, threatening to open a door long since locked.

Then I blink my eyes and I'm somewhere... different. The infirmary warps to a cold room that reeks of bleach and something too sweet. A series of hospital beds line the walls separated by sheets. Restraints lay atop the mattress.

"Seren."

I look ahead to a priest without a face, as if my memory is desperate to forget it. Even his voice is like static. He holds a lantern that dimly lights the room and the first empty bed. Holding out his hand, he beckons me forward. My feet carry me towards him. His gentle hands ease me into the bed before he begins tightening the straps. My body trembles. I'm scared. I'm so scared.

"Are you frightened?" He whispers. "If you do not wish to partake, you may leave. Your family will not be upset."

A scream sits on the tip of my tongue, the desperate plea to cry for help, as if I know what is to come but am too scared to voice it. But then that fear

settles as I look at the faceless priest. I am with my family. My family would never hurt me. There's nothing to fear, right?

"I don't want to leave. I will make you proud," I reply just as the priest tightens the final strap.

Then the vision dissipates and I find myself in the present, standing motionless in the infirmary as the priest gurgles blood. I can't be here. I can't watch this. I have to go. I have to go. *I have to run.*

I burst out of the infirmary with no inkling of where I'm headed. There's only the instinct to run. As if I can escape the memories swirling in my mind. But I don't. They follow me. Painful as thorns digging into my skin, ensuring to never release. I scratch and scratch, but then my shoulder clips the wall. The momentum sends me crashing to the floor, hissing from the rug burning my arm.

I almost throw up right there, but I dry heave instead. What's wrong with me? I've slain vampires more times than I can count. I've watched friends die before my eyes. I've seen others like that priest lose themselves to blight. Why is it affecting me so much now? Get a grip. Get a grip, Seren!

Suddenly, a hand rests on my back. I'm too riled up to think, swinging around quickly with my axe bared. The tip of the blade rests at the base of Lore's neck. He doesn't look the least bit worried. A slow hand raises to press against the handle, easily pushing the blade aside.

"Someone is a little jumpy," he says, kneeling on one knee beside me. His hand moves to rest on my cheek. "You're burning up."

I don't know why I let him ease me onto my feet. My mind has gone numb. No thoughts. Merely the urge to move. Lore's hand rests on the small of my back, guiding me down the hall to our room. I hadn't even realized I was running there. The door shuts behind us. Lore takes me to my bed where I plop down, listless and breathing heavily.

At some point, Lore must have left because he reappears in my vision with a basin of water and a rag. I flinch from the unexpected touch of a cool rag

against my face.

"Keep still," he demands. "You're filthy."

"Filthy?" I repeat, puzzled. Then I look down. I'm caked in blood. The vampire. When I killed him. His blood is everywhere. The rag turns pink then vibrant red from a few mere touches of my face. Lore dips the rag in the water, then returns to wipe at my neck.

"Hold out your hands," he orders. I do so, silently watching him remove the blood even from beneath my nails. As much as he can, at least. "Don't you think you went a bit overboard?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're covered in blood and left a rather... vivid scene behind."

My voice almost cracks when I ask, "You saw?"

"Mhm."

"But you didn't help?"

"Killing vampires is your sole purpose, remember?" Lore drops the rag into the basin. He reaches for the rope at my waist. Fear surges through me. Something primal that has me shoving Lore back. He falls from his knees to land on the floor.

"What are you doing?!" I holler, clutching my robes as I stand. I begin to retreat, feeling cornered, erratic, ready to flip at any moment. The room's too small. I can't breathe.

"Need I remind you that you are filthy?" Lore asks. He stands while dusting off his clothes. "Your robes don't even have white on them anymore."

"I... I can change by myself," I sputter. My shaking hands do not help to prove what I've said.

"Are you going to change anytime soon or stand there all evening?" Lore asks after a long moment of silence. His brows furrow when I, once again, don't reply. "You're acting awfully strange. Could you be losing your touch, Paladin?"

Lore jokes. He always jokes. Every damn second of every damn day. And he's about to regret it.

"Why must you always make me the bad guy?" I ask. More like scream. Loud enough to make Lore take a surprised step back. He doesn't do that again. Not even when I stomp towards him to shove my hands against his chest. "For once, just fucking once, can you at least pretend to care or listen or stop... stop making every damn thing I do into a way for you to fucking attack me?!"

"Explain. Explain to me why I was the only one chasing after a murderer. Why was I the only one being cheered on for slaughtering them? Why am I the one expected to do that while you wait around the corner to use whatever you see as ammunition against me?!" Another shove, but Lore doesn't move an inch. His expression remains placid, but there's something in his eyes that turns my blood cold. "And so what if I'm a bit on edge lately. Can you blame me? I have to put up with you and your--your--"

"Annoying bullshit?" he finishes.

"Yes! And if you know it's annoying bullshit, then stop already!"

"I think we both know it's much deeper than that," Lore says without missing a beat. His statement feels like a challenge or a very fucked up request to learn why it is deeper than that.

Rather than respond, I pivot on my heel to escape to the bathroom. The door slams shut behind me. I face myself in the mirror, overwhelmed by the exhausted man staring back at me. His eyes are bloodshot. Hair a ratted mess of knots and blood. Robes tattered and bloody. I scrub and scrub them in the sink like I honestly believe that will clean them of the blood. Of the evidence. All scrubbing does is make my hands raw.

I rest my back against the wall and slide down to sit atop the cold stone tiles. Too tired to even move, I fall asleep on the spot, incapable of escaping the darkness, the memories that have finally come to consume me.

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Hello, hello friends! I'm posting my story, Speak the Truth, on amazon as an eBook and paperback. Right now, Volume One of Speak the Truth is available as an eBook (there will be two more volumes to complete the series by the end of the year.) I've got to make some tweaks to the paperback before releasing it. If you're interested, go to amazon and search speak the truth twoony to purchase the eBook! ^^

Yikes. Seren had quite an intense moment this chapter. The death of the vampire, people cheering him on, and seeing the priest coming undone, this has all taken quite a toll. Doesn't help that Lore doesn't really let up either. What could possibly happen now?

58. The Blight Test

Warning: Child abuse, drug use, suicidal thoughts, and sexual assault.

Eleven Years Ago

Priest Aja awoke me late in the night. I rubbed my tired eyes, blinking rapidly against the dim light from Aja's lantern. He was a kind man somewhere in his early forties who kept watch over the trainees of the Holy Church. It was odd to see him out so late. But then he outstretched his hand and said, "Seren, it is time."

I hesitated to accept, overcome by sudden dread, for I now knew why he had come. Stories spread among the young seraphics and holy knights of the journey to becoming official and trusted members of the church. One could not be in any position of importance if they did not undergo certain tests. They had to train themselves mentally, physically, and spiritually. But the hardest act of all was the one I got out of bed for that night. And I knew that if I did not pass the test, it would most likely be because I died.

Priest Aja moved from one bed to the next among the barracks, waking the rare few who have managed to have the honor of moving up the ranks. The first step to becoming even more. My dream was to reach the title of Champion one day, like Olere. Ten years ago, he saved me. I wanted to make him proud. In other words, I would face whatever happened tonight with every ounce of will I had.

A total of thirteen seraphics joined Priest Aja, who guided us by dim light through the narrow halls of the barracks. Through the thin windows, we made out the high steeples of Trinia; the home of the Holy Church. All of us bowed our heads in a silent prayer before Aja led us to the forbidden chambers at the far end of Trinia's estate. Only a few held keys to the door that opened like a puzzle. I didn't quite understand what Aja did, only heard the *click, click, click* of locks. The door opened to a set of stairs leading to

darkness. In that darkness, soft cries echoed that grew louder the deeper we went until they became screams.

"Do not be afraid," Aja spoke calmly. His light did little to reveal the interior of the forbidden chamber. I caught brief glimpses of long hallways branching off filled with iron doors clasped tightly shut.

At the end of a hall that stretched for an eternity, Aja opened the final door where the light blinded me. My fellow trainees and I stood in a cold room that reeked of bleach and something too sweet. A series of hospital beds lined the walls separated by sheets. I noticed something peculiar about the beds; there were straps.

"Seren," Aja called. He sat the lantern aside to guide me into the first bed. He must have felt my trembles because, as he tightened the straps until I couldn't move, he asked, "Are you frightened? If you do not wish to partake, you may leave. Your family will not be upset."

I felt a scream on the tip of my tongue, the desperate plea to cry for help. But then I realized I didn't need help because I was with my family. Family would never hurt me.

"I don't want to leave. I will make you proud," I said just as Aja tightened the final strap.

Smiling, Aja patted my head. "We have always been very proud of you. At this rate, you will be one of the youngest paladins we've ever had the honor of fighting alongside. During the time to come, you must remember that this is done for the betterment of our world. The Three Mothers will protect you and bring you to the light."

The fear subsided, replaced by a sudden ounce of courage. The Holy Church did what they had to in order to fight back the darkness of Vexis, to destroy the vampires and their hold on the world. Sometimes, that meant taking risks. I would risk it all to rid the world of the vampire scourge, to save families like mine and become a man as great as Olere.

Tonight, I would battle against the vampire's greatest weapon; blight. Any who wished to work in the field had to build an immunity. No member of the Holy Church could risk falling to a vampire bite. It meant the vampire could kill them on the spot, put their team in danger, or lead to the death of civilians. The ceremony was necessary, and an honor.

While Aja strapped in the remaining participants, two more priests entered with carts containing a few vials of liquid and needles. They approached me first, offering up a prayer and inviting me to join. I did, in hopes that the Three Mothers would give me strength, that they would guide me out of this darkness and into the light. But as I prayed, my stomach churned.

I was scared.

I was so scared.

"Is that really..." The word sat heavy at the back of my throat.

"Blight," the priestess finished while wielding the filled syringe. "Yes."

Memories resurfaced of the beast that cursed my dreams. Seeing Mama on the floor clutching the very thing killing her as if it gave her life. Her deranged eyes rolling into the back of her head accompanied by giggles and moans. What kind of monster made someone forget the fear of death?

I was about to find out. The syringe pierced my skin. I groaned, trying to prepare myself for the toxin, to steel myself into fighting it off. I was a fool.

Every thought faded away to be overtaken by a mixture of ecstasy and comfort. My muscles relaxed and my body trembled. The room swam as melted colors, twisting and combining to form vivid hallucinations. I imagined so many things; my family alive and well, laughing beside me. Standing along the edge of the sea, tasting the salt in the air. The metal tiles morphed into butterflies that fluttered around the room. Their wings tickled my cheeks. When I heaved a long breath, I tasted mint and chocolate and candy.

But then the colors faded and the world crumbled into dust. I cried, choked tears and whimpers mixed in with the deranged laughter of those around me. The highs and lows came and went. Sometimes we laughed. Sometimes we screamed. I didn't want to hear any of it... nor the moans. Or the creaking of my bed. The touch of someone's hands. Someone's lips on my neck. My chest. All of me. The pain I told myself was part of the hallucination. Even if my muddled mind tried to understand and accept the truth, I couldn't because after every high came a consuming rage. A desperation like no other, and a thirst that couldn't be quenched without blight. Without another hit that sent me reeling.

The time spent strapped to that bed felt too long and too short. I screamed out in a desperate plea for more. But the priests would skip a dose or lessen it and we all lashed out. I heard the others. Kicking. Screaming. Gnawing at the leather straps until our lips and gums bled. I nearly bit through my own tongue to get the priest's attention. They had to gag me afterwards.

Day after day, night after night, I felt the ecstasy of blight, then the sudden down. And when I was so addicted I honestly believed I'd rather slit my own throat than go a minute in the real world, the priests stopped coming all together.

We screamed and screamed until some of the trainees went eerily quiet. Then came the sweats. I thought I was on fire one moment and frozen the next. I struggled breathing. My muscles ached. My bed sores bled. I'd beg the priests for just a drop, just one little taste to ease the pain, but they wouldn't give any of us so much as an herb to chew on for the pain.

Weeks went by before I took my first painless breath and another two before the priests shot me up for the last time. But it wasn't the same. When the priest spoke, I actually heard him say, "Seren, who is speaking to you?"

"Priest... Aja."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"How are you feeling?"

"...drowsy," I whispered, only realizing a few moments later that drowsy was *all* I felt. No pleasure. No pain. Just exhaustion.

"Good, that's very good." Aja placed his hand on my arm. The touch felt oddly familiar... and uncomfortable. Like poison. Like pure fear. I thought of the bed creaking. The scent of cigar smoke that I only now realized lingered around him. And pain. I pulled my arm away, staring wide-eyed at Aja. That fear amplified, for some reason, like something wasn't right. When I blinked, I thought I remembered Aja on top of--

"Drink this." Aja handed me a glass of water. I chugged it, hoping it'd help disperse the convoluted memory of Aja leaning over my bed, of his twisted smile and his hands all over me. It was a nightmare. Nothing more. Something the darkness tried to use to hurt me, tried to make me lose faith.

"You've done well to pass this test," Aja added. "The Three Mothers smile upon you and led you here. No longer will you fall prey to the vampire's evil. Their bites will make you tired, like this, but you can overcome it, can't you?"

"I can," I croaked. Peering about the room, I noticed some of the beds were empty. "Some are missing..."

"They did not pass the test."

I knew some of them. Friends from the orphanage. Those I talked to and laughed with not that long ago. They left without me getting a chance to say goodbye.

Aja put his hand on my shoulder. I wanted to puke.

"Do not worry, my child," he said. "The Three Mothers will guide their souls to return here when they're ready."

Then he left to inspect the others, leaving me to practically inhale the food on my tray. I passed the test. I was on the path to becoming a paladin,

battling the very beasts that caused such pain to others. The memories of Aja, they were... they were a lie. No matter what the darkness tried, I would not lose faith. The Holy Church was my family.

Family would never hurt each other.

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And there we have it; how Seren became immune to blight and all that he went through. Did you expect it to be this bad? Will Seren ever be able to truly face his past? Will he ever be able to tell Lore or anyone about all that he has went through?

59. Pillows For Safety

Present

I awake with a start, gasping for breath on the bathroom floor. A few minutes may have passed or hours, I'm unclear. But the memories of my test, of priest Aja... they make my skin crawl. The remainder of my robes are thrown off. I practically launch myself into the shower. Searing hot water burns my skin. Heat is a much better sensation than the distorted thoughts of Aja's hands all over me. I scratch until my skin is raw. Blood circles the drain. I'm unclear if it's the vampire's or mine.

"It was a nightmare," I say sternly, like a mantra. "A nightmare from the blight. Nothing more. The toxin warped your mind. That's it."

Family would never hurt me. They're all I have left. Without them, I'm... just a murderer.

Stepping out of the shower, I realize I didn't bring a change of clothes. Luckily for me, Lore is asleep, or at least pretending to be when I exit in a bathrobe. Quietly, I grab a change of clothes and return to the bathroom. The fabric feels like needles against my arms, irritating my inflamed skin. Even the soft mattress does little to ease me. I toss and turn, incapable of finding rest. Every time I close my eyes, I see Aja and that vile grin. I smell cigar smoke. I feel his lips on my neck and his fingers on my thighs. Then I awake and lay in bed, sweating enough to warrant another shower but I haven't the energy to get up.

The mattress suddenly dips. I jolt at the unexpected warmth seeping into my side. Lore's alluring blue eyes meet mine. He smiles like it isn't the weirdest damn thing to slip into bed with me. Admittedly, he probably isn't that bothered by doing so merely because he knows the action bothers me. And bothering me has become his new favorite hobby.

"What are you doing?" I hiss, pressing my forearm against his chest. He almost slips off the bed from the force.

"Isn't it obvious?" He attempts to brush my arm aside. My hand twists into his nightshirt. He sighs. "If you continue tossing and turning, I won't get any sleep either. Cuddling is a far better option."

"I do not see how that can be true."

"Vampire, dhampir, and mortal alike are social creatures. Often all we need is the comforting warmth of another to ease our troubled minds. Besides, the children sleep in my bed after having a nightmare all the time. I have no issue with this."

"This is entirely different than kids jumping into bed with their father."

Lore suddenly throws his legs over mine. The momentary surprise lessens my pressure on his chest. He uses that to his advantage, wiggling close enough that my shoulder brushes his chest. Our heads share the same pillow. His long hair tickles my nose. He smells nice. He's warm.

"Different or not, the sentiment is the same. I am merely here to help you sleep," he whispers.

"Say that to your legs that are tangled with mine."

"There is no ulterior motive."

"Bullshit." I push off Lore to sit up. "I'm not in the mood for your teasing--"

Lore grabs my shoulder to tug me back into bed, now also on my side so we're face to face. His stern expression prevents me from leaving.

"Everyone has nightmares," he says, hardly above a whisper. A chill overtakes his normally electrifying blue eyes. "If we do not accept help, those nightmares will get much, much worse. Too much to bear, even."

"Do you speak from experience?"

"Of course. I'm a two hundred and something year old dhampir. Nightmares are my speciality," he jokes once more, but this time I know it's another way to hide. He does that a lot. Probably because he's good at hiding truths behind joking smiles and quick wit. I might not have known better if we haven't been spending as much time together as we are.

"And who helped your nightmares?" I ask, shivering when Lore's hand moves down my shoulder to my arm. His fingertips against my skin reminds me momentarily of Aja. But seeing Lore, feeling his hair brush my cheek, it reminds me that this touch is his and that it's okay. My toes curl in ways I wish they wouldn't. And his concerned gaze taking in the scratch marks along my arms warms my chest.

"Her name was Lilly," Lore answers, gaze oddly distant. "She was my eldest daughter, the first I ever adopted."

I recall the plaques I saw in the school house. At the top of the wall, the very first one faded by age, did have a name starting with L.

"I had very few staff at the estate and no family at the time. I thought I didn't need them, that solitude would do me better, but I suppose... I was much lonelier than I realized," he mumbles more to himself than me. "I happened across Lily in town begging for scraps. Her parents had dropped her off like garbage. I don't know what urged me to grab her hand, but before I knew it, I brought her home. She wouldn't move out from under her bed for almost two weeks. I thought I had made a terrible mistake, that she wouldn't be happy around a stranger. A male dhampir, at that."

"Then one night, she came sprinting into my room screaming about a monster in her room. Of course, it was nothing more than the shadow of a very determined branch that had got stuck on the window from the wind. But I managed to ease her concerns and she asked me to stay with her. I slept on a chair by her bed. Although my back ached the next morning, I don't recall having ever slept better than I did that night. No nightmares. Just the soothing sound of her breath and her warm, tiny hand in mine. Having the children around makes me feel at ease," Lore finishes, his eyes a warm blue that could melt the coldest of ice. He moves slightly causing his head to push forward. Our foreheads almost touch.

"Was Lily a vampire, dhampir?"

"Mortal," he says.

"Was she a seraphic?" I ask, because if she wasn't...

"No. She passed away many, many years ago," Lore answers quietly.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

"It's alright. I would have been much more upset had you asked back then, but not now. I've come to terms with knowing that, should I adopt a mortal child without magic, I will outlive them. I don't think that means I shouldn't give them what I hope to be a loving home."

My foot knocks against his, pretending not to notice how he hooks his foot around my ankle to keep us close.

"Don't try so hard to make yourself sound like a great guy," I whisper.

"I never try hard for that. I merely succeed in being a great guy." Lore's soft laughter mingles with my own. His hand on my arm has moved up once more. The tips of his fingers breach the sleeve of my shirt. His thigh brushes against mine. When we breathe, our chests touch. My gaze drifts to his slightly parted lips. Even seeing the slight peek of a fang doesn't stop the growing yearning in my chest. The desire to lean in and crash my lips against his--

I flip to my other side and throw a pillow between us. Lore sits motionless for a moment. Then gazes at me, eyes blinking rapidly in adorable confusion.

"S-Stay on your side," I say, berating myself for stuttering. Flopping back on the bed, I keep my back to him, but that does not save me. There's the dip of the mattress. Lore's hair tickles my arm. Then his lips press against my shoulder, the softest touch like a butterfly landing atop a flower petal. And he's gone.

"Now, I will stay on my side," he says. "Goodnight, Seren."

I grip my shoulder so hard it will probably bruise in the morning. Air escapes my lungs so rapidly I have to heave a long breath to regain my composure. Then my trembling hand grasps the pillow and I clench my eyes shut, knowing I should have said something about that kiss but incapable of coming up with a pathetic lie.

Besides, Lore was right. The nightmares remain at bay through the night.

When I wake, Lore's soft expression is the first thing I see. He sleeps soundly, neither frowning nor smiling. He must have moved his hair at some point in the night because it has all been brushed back to be tucked neatly under his chin like an extra piece of pillow. I bite my lip to stifle a laugh. I damn near reach up to brush a few stray strands from his porcelain cheeks, but manage to contain myself. Good thing too because there's a knock at the door.

"Your Grace," Draven calls.

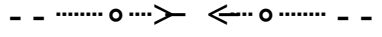
I pretend to wake up at the sound of his voice. Lore's eyes flicker open, as vast as an evening sky. For a moment, his eyes are devoid of all emotion, then in a blink he sighs.

"We have arrived at the capital," Draven finishes. "We are to disembark shortly."

"Alright, we will be out momentarily," Lore replies. He waits a moment, perhaps to ensure Draven is gone, then he whispers at me, "Good morning, my sweet Seren."

I roll my eyes, but reluctantly grumble, "Morning."

When he smiles, honestly, my breath catches like a kid with their first crush. I can't even lie to myself that it doesn't. So I swiftly throw myself out of bed to get dressed, relieved that Lore doesn't try to pester me.



Hello, hello friends! Glorious news, one of my stories Speak the Truth is now available for purchase on amazon as an eBook or paperback. It's a three part series that will be fully uploaded by the end of the year, but if you've read STT or enjoy my stories, please consider giving it a purchase!

To purchase Speak the Truth go to amazon and search Speak the Truth Volume One Twoony and it will pop up if it's available in your country. You don't need a kindle or anything for the eBook so if you want to purchase it you can read it on your phone or your computer. I will update this series again when volume three is out to remind everyone, but you can also follow my social media if you want updates on anything else.

Back to the story haha Aw, we got some cuddling time in~ Has Lore managed to fix the damage he did earlier? We got to learn some more about Lore's past as well. Our boys are getting closer whether they're ready to admit it or not ;D

60. Loraleigh, the Prophet

Disembarking from the airship proceeds to be a hassle. After what happened on the ship, passengers hurry to escape. I would be among them, but the captain called for Lore and I to go over a few more things. She thanks us, particularly me, for "slaying the beast." Lore says nothing. Neither do I. Then we depart, finally stepping out of the airship and through the station to stand among the crowded streets of my home, of the kingdom's capital; Rhamie.

Even Lore's home city pales in comparison to Rhamie. Thin streets push through overcrowded and towering buildings that stretch so high one must crane their neck to see the peeks. Stacks of metal and billows of smoke hang over the city, a heavy fog settling among us. Though I barely see the blue sky above, I've never once hated it. Perhaps because this is where I've been, where I learned to protect myself and been safe from those who took my family. Even as the crowds brush past us, knocking shoulders and elbows, and car horns blare while their gears noisily squeak, I smile in pure delight.

Cyan is not as appreciative. "I forgot how bad this place fucking wreaks," he spits, then damn near tumbles into the road when attempting to avoid a passerby.

Draven clutches Cyan's arm to bring the troublemaker into his side. They peer at one another for a moment longer than necessary. I bite back a devilish grin. Then Cyan clears his throat and takes two steps back.

"Thanks," he mutters under his breath.

"Stay close," Draven says, allowing Cyan to take a tentative hold of the back of his sleeve.

I glance at Lore to gauge his reaction to the obvious interest Draven and Cyan are showing each other. However, he isn't as intrigued by the potential

of their union as I am. Lore observes swiftly and silently. I do the same, curious if he's searching the city for something in particular.

Draven holds out his hand to call for a car. One comes almost immediately, likely because the driver saw the clothes Lore is wearing. Although the capital's overwhelmed by nobles and aristocrats, Lore is a Grand Duke. Even his clothes are garish in comparison. Everyone knows Lore is a man of status and status means money.

"I will hail another car for Cyan and me," Draven explains after opening the car door. The backseat is barely big enough for two.

"Actually, why don't the three of you take this car? I..." My gaze drifts to Lore, who has already slid into the backseat. I narrowly catch his inquisitive stare, then clear my throat. "I want to visit Trinia Cathedral for personal reasons."

"Wow." Cyan whistles. "You didn't lie. I was expecting some bogus excuse about visiting the cat you left behind for a friend to care for." Cyan winks at me. "You get a few points for being honest."

Then he throws his luggage into the trunk and heads for the front seat. If Lore has anything to say about my visit to Trinia, he keeps it to himself. Draven informs me where Lore's estate resides, then they're gone.

I thought my walk to Trinia would be one of relief and joy; that is what I imagined it to be when I first arrived at Lore's estate. I couldn't wait to return home, but now, as I peer at Trinia cathedral, a pearl among charcoal towers, I almost dread it. A part of me wishes the dark towers would reach in to stain the glistening white walls of the church to physically show the darkness within. The thought makes my stomach churn; a mixture of regret and guilt. How could I think such a thing about my home?

The gates of thick stone stand before me. Holy Knights march along the walls and watch from the towers that overlook the capital. These walls rival that of the castle. As if they are battling for supremacy, the castle and cathedral peer over Rhamie from opposite sides. Their high steeples and glistening stained glass windows shimmer with shared mastery. I never saw

it as much of a competition before, but now, I can't help but to frown at how the church and the royal family manage to bicker even through architecture.

Once, no walls surrounded the church, but after years of vampires and dhampir alike attempting to attack those of the church, the walls were put up as a precaution. The front gates remain open, but watched. My hesitation to step through them nearly sends me running back to Lore, like he's a damn security blanket protecting me from monsters in my closet. I fear what I'll say, what little updates I have to give, how much I don't want to give any update at all, and what sort of disappointed expression Olere will wear. But I take a deep breath and tell myself over and over again that I'm home. That it's okay. That I'm safe.

If only my hands wouldn't tremble as I step past the wall.

The interior hasn't changed. Not that I expected it would. Civilians and seraphics alike litter the grounds. Some sit among the garden. Others head for the chapel to pray. I search for Jakoby, wondering if he has made it safely. Then my steps come to a halt when I spot the familiar barracks, where I have lived for nearly two decades, to the far right of the grounds. And if I were to head towards them, walk to the back of the church far out of view; I'd arrive at the training arena and the path leading to the cold rooms beneath the grounds.

My throat runs dry. I rub at my neck that's abruptly overwhelmed by goosebumps. Why do I feel so... wrong?

"Seren!" A heavy hand falls on my shoulder. Finally, a sense of ease washes over me. I pivot on my heel to smile at Olere. "Welcome back, my boy, but what are you doing here? I hadn't received word that you would be visiting."

"I did send a letter expressing that I would be visiting Vexsis with Lore--" I catch myself. "Lord Seymour. Our airship won't leave for two days so I thought I would stop by."

"I wish you would have told me sooner. We could have put together a special dinner, but I will appreciate this time we have together while we

can. Come, you must be tired from your long journey." Olere sets an arm on my shoulder to guide me towards the housing complexes belonging to higher members of the church; the champions. As a paladin, I do have a larger room than others, but even we sleep at the barracks unless we have a family within the city.

Olere's abode consists of a single floor containing a kitchen, living/dining area, a bedroom and a bathroom. Though we all know he gets paid a fair amount, his quarters remain relatively sparse although I always note that he has a few knick-knacks from his family displayed proudly on the mantelpiece. Including a crude drawing I made of him and I when I was quite young.

"Can't you be rid of that?" I ask, pointing at the framed drawing that doesn't deserve the attention.

"No," Olere states. He gestures at the table for me to sit while he gets us both a glass of water. "That is the first drawing you ever gave to me."

"It's horrendous."

"Considering you drew it when you were eight, it's quite impressive." Olere chuckles. He sits across from me. "If you dislike it so much, I will consider disposing of it if you draw me a new and improved version."

"I fear my artistic abilities have only worsened as the years have gone by."

"Then the drawing stays." Olere glances at the mantelpiece, his gaze softening as it always does. Then he clears his throat. "So, tell me, how have things been going at Lord Seymour's estate?"

The immediate relief upon seeing him diminishes. Here comes the fear and worry that he'll see right through me; that he'll somehow determine the battling disposition within.

"There isn't much for me to say than what has been in my letters. I've yet to find any proof pointing towards Lord Seymour's involvement. I know it hasn't been long so I will continue to do my best to search."

"I should have been more specific in my questioning. I am more curious about how things have been going *for you?* You've never had an assignment such as this. No doubt those at the estate do not find you the most comforting to be around. How are you holding up?"

"I..." I cannot say. When I look into Olere's eyes, I fear putting disappointment within them. I fear that he may come to hate me should I say what's truly on my mind. That I don't mind being there as much as I once did. That I don't believe Lore's children will grow up to be monsters like we've been told. Draven may be a creep, but he's a loyal one. Cyan has a temper and obsession with explosions, but he had his reasons for leaving the church. Arline protects those she cares about with ferocity. And Lore... Lore is...

More than I expected. More than I can handle. Everything I never wanted and everything I wish I had.

"Seren?" Olere grasps my hand, returning me from the haze of my mind. His gaze sharpens. He senses I'm holding back, but before he can ask, there's a gentle knock at the door.

"Champion Olere?"

My eyes widen. I nearly knock the chair over when I abruptly stand and grasp my necklace to hold firmly over my heart before Olere even opens the door.

"Great Prophet, may the Holy Mothers bless you," I say, head bowed in the face of the highest authority within the Holy Church; Loraleigh, the Prophet.

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Ohoho, so Seren isn't feeling as at home at the church as he once did. He's questioning everything more and more but he fears losing Olere. Do you think Seren will be able to keep his father figure through all this? And what do you expect will happen with the Prophet showing up?

61. Asking the Right Questions

"There is no need for such formalities, Seren," Loraleigh says. Her glistening ebony hair rests over her thin shoulder to nearly touch her knees. Approaching me, she rests her hand on my shoulder and presses her forehead against mine. "Welcome home, Paladin."

"It's good to be back," I say, even if the words taste sour.

"You sure learned of Seren's arrival quickly," Olere says, holding out his hand to gesture at the table. Loraleigh takes a seat while Olere gets her a glass of water.

"You know word travels fast here. I heard a few trainees discussing seeing your return." Loraleigh nods at me. "If you have the time, do pay them a visit. They sounded very eager to see you."

"Our airship to Vexsis doesn't leave until the morning after next so I have more than enough time," I explain. I'm surprised to hear any of the trainees had missed me. While training isn't my primary job, I did visit the training grounds to assist from time to time. I always thought the kids found me a bit boring. It's a little nice to hear that they want to see me, if it's true.

Olere returns with Loraleigh's glass.

"Ah yes, Olere has been updating me. This is an unexpected turn of events. I trust that you are aware of how dangerous this is, but it's a great opportunity." She sips from her glass, then rests it quietly on the table. "Lore is well known in Vexsis. There's a possibility you may meet members of the monarchy."

My wide-eyed expression makes Loraleigh giggle.

"Don't worry too much. I truly doubt they would cause harm to you themselves. Valyork is paranoid, but not a complete fool, although I must tell you to keep an eye out for his eldest daughter, Roemithia. Out of any of

them, she's the most likely to cause a scene." She pats my hand. "Just keep your eyes open."

"I will."

"Now, I'm sure you both know why I'm here," she continues, glancing between us. "As I mentioned, Olere has been keeping me updated. Now, I will update you; the other paladins have had no such luck in determining if their targets are the serial killer either."

"Or if there even is one," Olere adds.

"Indeed. We may have been paranoid, but I would like to continue the investigation a while longer, especially yours."

I raise a brow at that. "Mine, Prophet?"

She nods. Thin eyes narrow even further until they are mere slits that make her normally warm brown eyes appear bleak and black. "In one of your recent letters, you mentioned that Lore spoke briefly about his biological parents. Not his adoptive ones; the Seymour family. Could you elaborate further on that?"

My nails almost rip through my robes to pierce my thighs. I try to ease the tension by unclenching my hands. Why did I send that damn letter?!

"I fear there isn't much more to tell. In order to gain some of Lord Seymour's trust, I thought that I had to reveal something personal. I spoke of what happened to my family in hopes that he would return the gesture. All I learned was what we already knew about his biological parents," I answer, hoping they won't ask for more or think too much of it.

But then Olere speaks, "I do find it suspicious that Lord Seymour only brought up his biological mother and father. There is a chance that Seren merely hadn't earned enough of his trust yet to learn more about the Seymour family. However, it couldn't hurt to continue looking into their deaths."

"Weren't they all proven to be accidents?" I interject without even realizing it.

"Not all of them. The eldest boy, Belroe, was never found. And their daughter, Leymin, was a party girl, but she was known to be very careful. We can chalk her overdose up to an accident, but then there were the deaths of both parents not long after. It has always been suspicious," Loraleigh says, thankfully not looking more into my interjection. She may learn that I'm not as suspicious of Lore as they are. Nowhere near, in fact.

"If he did have something to do with their deaths, could we even do anything about it? They died almost two centuries ago," I inquire.

"Two centuries ago or not, if Lore is a murderer then he must atone for his crimes." Loraleigh leans back, arms crossed and stern gaze set forward. It's as if she's imagining Lore seated in front of her and wishing for him to be set ablaze. "Those like Lore Seymour, we must keep our eyes on them."

"Them?" I repeat curiously.

"Vampires and dhampir in positions of power. They will do anything to undermine the church, including the most wicked of actions. Even if Lore is not involved in this mess, he is involved in something and we must discover what it is."

"We aren't certain of that," Olere argues, puzzling me. Champion or not, to interrupt the Prophet is a great insult. But Olere holds firm, speaking sternly, "We are looking into Lord Seymour now because he is one of few capable of pulling off such a grand scheme. However, if he is proven innocent, we cannot merely make up an excuse to rattle him. If another issue arises that may concern him, we can look into that, but anything more is taking things too far. We mustn't work that way."

"Mustn't work what way?" Loraleigh hums. She rests her elbows on the table, hands steepled in a calm fashion, but her eyes are ferocious. "Our way has always been to protect our people from the beasts of Vexsis in whatever means necessary. We needn't proof of Lore's transgressions. He is a monster and monsters are all the same."

I spoke similar words many times. I always believed what the Prophet said without question. But now as I sit before her and think of Lore, of the children, of even Draven, Cyan and Arline, I can't bring myself to agree. Her words hang heavy and a voice whispers; *she's framing Lore because of a personal vendetta, because of her own hatred.*

Am I not a hypocrite to think that? Because I always had a personal vendetta against vampires. My own hatred.

"My apologies, Prophet," Olere says, although he keeps his stern gaze locked on Loraleigh. "I merely mean to say that the church must present a good reason to the people for what we do. They wish to see and hear the good that we've done, otherwise we risk misunderstandings."

"You are right." Loraleigh nods, eyes closed. Then she smiles at me. "We needn't worry. You will find what we need, won't you, Seren?"

Her words sting like needles piercing my skin.

"Of course, Prophet." But my words taste like lies.

"Well, I shouldn't take up any more of your time. I appreciate getting to speak with you, Seren." Loraleigh rises. Olere and I do the same, both bowing our heads. "Enjoy your visit home and try to get some much needed rest before your trip to Vexsis."

"Thank you, Prophet," I say. "I will make sure to update you as quickly as I can after I return."

"Shall I escort you to the cathedral?" Olere asks.

Loraleigh holds up a hand and shakes her head. "No, no, spend this time with Seren."

Then she leaves. My muscles relax. I take a breath that doesn't feel strained. The room feels bigger and air lighter. I ease the tension from my knuckles by flexing my fingers.

"I should probably visit the trainees. There's no telling what Lord Seymour may want to get up to tomorrow," I say even if, once, I'd spend hours talking to Olere. Now, I fear staying too long will result in his realization.

"Alright. Let's head over," he says. I almost argue for him to stay at home and rest, but if I did that he'd lecture me about treating him like an old man. Those lectures often last at least thirty minutes. Once it lasted two hours. I almost fell asleep--three times.

We head towards the training grounds together. Once more, a sense of dread fills me. Memories of the past filter in. Ones that didn't bother me as much back then. But now I recall Paladin Nallin beating my knuckles and thighs until they ached and bruised. I see the children ahead of us; those like me, those now in the same position... that I helped put there. And I feel sick. Sick enough that I stop and press the back of my hand to my mouth to keep back the vomit tickling the back of my throat.

"Is something wrong?" Olere asks, oblivious to my plight, as I hope he will remain, but I can't control this; these emotions overwhelming me.

"What happens to those who don't pass the tests?" I ask, thinking of what Cyan said, of what made me remember those I knew disappearing from the church. One here or there that we were told left of their own accord.

"Which tests? You and I both know that the blight--"

"I know about that one," I bite more fiercely than I meant to. Olere's stunned stare doesn't even prevent me from pushing further. It's as if someone turned on a faucet that has been rusted shut all these years. "All of us trained and were sent to where we served best; priests, holy knights, and if we were lucky, paladins or champions. But what of those who didn't want any of that? The ones from when I was a kid, those who didn't agree with the church or didn't bother training; what happened to them?"

What a doozy! We've met the Prophet and heard some updates about what the other paladins are up to. What do you think about her and

what's going on? Seren's also taking a chance by talking to Olere. What do you think he has to say?

Story Branch: Draven

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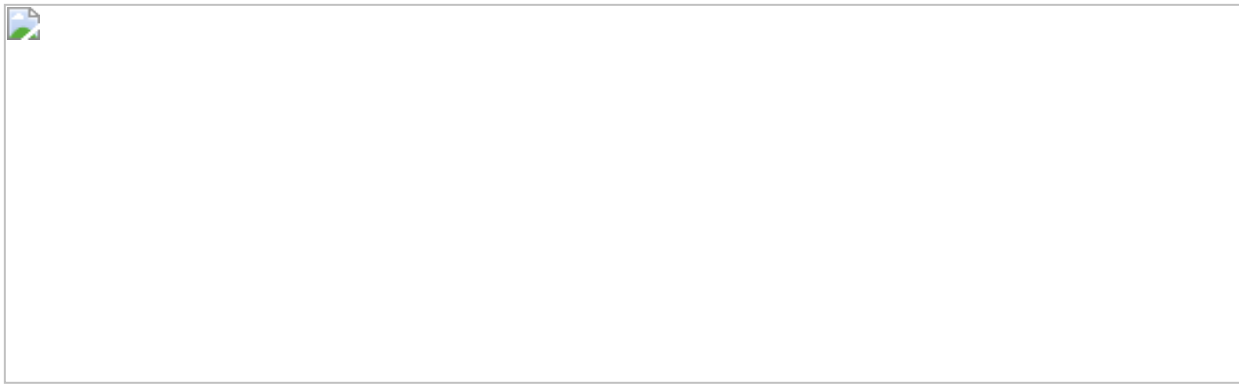

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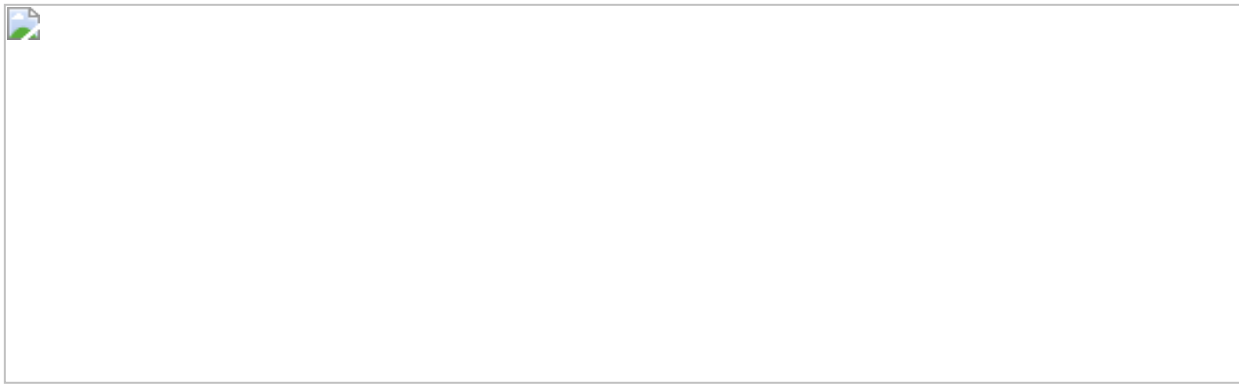

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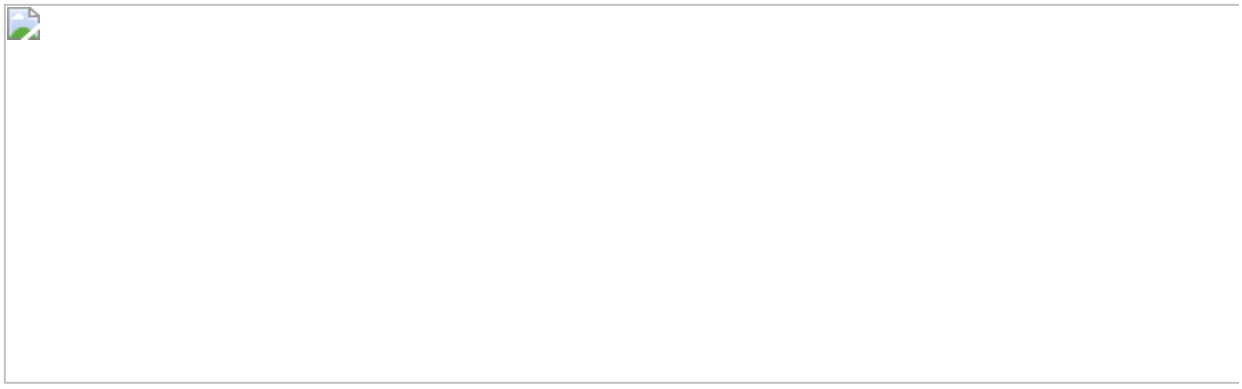

62. Always There

Olere's puzzlement amplifies. His expression appears genuine. I don't know if that's because I want it to be or it truly is.

"I don't know what brought this on, but the answer is the same as it was back then," he explains. "Those who do not wish to stay may leave. They're either sent to live with relatives, foster homes, orphanages, or if they're old enough, the church seeks employment and housing for them."

"Did you relocate some of them? Did you see all that with your own eyes?"

I know I sound suspicious. I know that makes Olere suspicious. His eyes say as such, glossing over me in apparent worry.

"A couple, but that was never my primary job. Typically, the priests saw to relocations. Holy knights and paladins were summoned if long travel time was involved to protect the child," he answers earnestly, then grabs my shoulder. "Why are you asking me all this?"

How am I meant to answer that? Tell him that Cyan managed to turn my world upside down after I went to him in a drunken stupor. Tell him that Lore and his family have made me question everything I've ever known. Admit that I don't know if I trust the church as much as I once did and that--that includes him.

"I just... I was thinking about my trainee days. Those who left, I never saw or heard from them again. Maybe being on this unusual assignment has made me sentimental, but I'd like to speak to them. Is that possible?" I ask.

"I could certainly look into it." Olere hesitates to release my shoulder. He offers a reassuring smile. "You have to remember that some don't want to look back on their years here. We know training is excruciating and not everyone can handle it. However, I will try to get in contact with those from your year. If any are willing to speak to you, I will let you know. How does that sound?"

"Good. That sounds great. Thank--"

"I have a condition," Olere interjects. I bite my lip. He steps closer. The tips of his boots breach my peripheral vision. I raise my gaze to meet his, unsure of what his silent expression means. "You must clue me in on what this is really about," he says.

I almost whimper. He must see the sorrow because his expression softens.

"Seren," he whispers my name like a father would. Like my father did. He presses his hand to my back to push me towards a nearby bench. We sit together. He leans forward, elbows on his knees as he looks towards me. "I know you, son. I know when you're hiding something that's so overwhelming it threatens to consume you. What's on your mind?"

I shake my head, willing him to stop. Praying to the Holy Mothers that he won't ask again. I've been on a roll with not listening today. The truth may spill out and I won't know what to do. Olere cheats by ruffling my hair in that affectionate fatherly fashion and the flood gates open; "Have you ever struggled with your faith?"

His hand stills. My heart stops. I can't do this. I leap to my feet. "It's nothing, forget I asked!"

But Olere grabs my hand so gently that the hold freezes me in place. I dare to look back at him, surprised to find him smiling. "Fear not, this is a talk I am more than willing to have," he says.

"But--"

"I think you will find my answer to be quite surprising." He winks, then rises from the bench. "Why don't we head back? This is a private discussion."

"R-Right..." I follow him like a lost puppy, expecting his raised voice or disappointed scowl to greet me once we're in his home. But all Olere does is sit at his table and insist I do the same. Scurrying to retake my position at the table, I sit with my head lowered and wait for the inevitable shame.

"I have shared with you how my wife, husband, and son were murdered by vampires," Olere says. Even after two decades have passed, his voice still breaks at the mention of it. Olere never remarried or had more children. He still wears his ring, and the other two around his neck. I've noticed, when he gets nervous or scared, he'll hold them.

Heaving a long breath to steady himself, Olere adds, "My family and I were believers of the Three Mothers and the Holy Church. We prayed and went to church and did what we thought was right, but when those... when those bastards high on bloodlust took them from me without even letting me say goodbye, it was not the vampires I hated."

My attention shifts to Olere, who clasps his hands atop the table. His jaw trembles and his face takes on a hue of red. Tears build in his eyes. "I hated the Three Mothers for not warning me that morning. I hated them for not telling me to be late for my duties or not even bothering to go at all. If I had, I would have died with them--"

I choke back a sob because his words are ones I've heard from so many. All those who lost their loved ones. The same words I said and thought after losing my family; *if only I died with them, it would have been easier.*

"I hated that the Mothers did not protect my family when they needed them most," he spits as if the anger is as raw as ever. "Because we were people of their church and they left my family to die when they did not deserve it. Our boy... he died last. I never told you that. He saw it all happen, just as you did, but I wasn't there. I didn't save him, so I hated myself too. I failed him."

"You didn't know that was going to happen," I whisper.

"That didn't matter. I hated everything. Everyone. I couldn't believe in Goddesses who would let that happen to innocence, who would take my greatest joy. But being angry at divine beings didn't really make me feel better. It didn't bring my family back and I didn't know what to do with myself. Everything felt so utterly meaningless until paladins arrived. They were interviewing survivors or remaining family and friends about the group of vampires who killed my family. They were ravaging the countryside. I was a priest at the time, low ranked as I had never planned to see battle. I did

mostly healing works, but the paladins offered me a chance to take my revenge."

"Did you?" I ask.

"They would not let me join them. I wasn't trained, but after I was, I finally felt like I had purpose again. I had something to live for. And a few years later, I found you." Olere rests his hand on my arm, holding tight. "So, to answer your question more simply; yes, I have struggled with my faith. I still do sometimes. That is nothing to be ashamed of."

I want to believe him. I want to know that Olere will always be on my side, but this is different. I...

"If you wish to leave the church, that is entirely up to you," Olere adds because, as I feared, he can see right through me. It makes me want to run or beg for forgiveness. "Although, I admit I find it rather odd that you've asked me this after visiting Lord Seymour, who managed to convince a seraphic to leave before," he adds.

"This isn't... that's not why..." I don't know. I don't know what I want. I don't know what I'm doing. "Wouldn't you hate me if I left?" I end up whimpering because that's all I can think about. "Wouldn't you be disappointed?"

"No." Olere moves around the table to sit beside me. The moment his arm wraps around my shoulder, the first panicked tear falls. I wipe it away and try to breathe evenly. "No, Seren, listen to me; I have been nothing but proud of you. And I want nothing but happiness for you. If that happiness is outside of the church, if leaving is what you want, then I will support that decision."

Would he still support it if he knew about Lore?

Olere ruffles my hair again. It's as if he hit a reset button. My panic eases until it is barely more than a twitch in my hands. His voice softens when he whispers, "Had my boy survived, I'd like to think he would have grown up to be like you."

"I'm sure he would have been much better than me." I laugh through the tears.

Olere rests his chin atop my head, pulling me into a very much needed hug. "You truly never do give yourself enough credit, my boy."

I hope this is all true. I hope Olere will stand beside me no matter what I choose. His encouragement gives me strength and I pray to the Holy Mothers, to whomever may listen, that Olere doesn't know about the children. If they're being "taken care of" like Cyan said, please let Olere be oblivious. I don't know if I can handle it if he wasn't.

"I should get going," I say after the tears dry up. Olere releases me, though one hand remains on my shoulder. "I'll, um, visit the trainees tomorrow."

"Alright, I will let them know so they can prepare for your arrival."

"Please don't. They will probably try to prank me."

"Which is why I will definitely be telling them." Olere smiles. It's contagious. I smile back.

"Thank you for... for everything."

"There is nothing to thank me for," he says, following me to the door. He hesitates to speak, making me pause in my departure. Then he sighs. "Seren, I... I shouldn't have brought you to the orphanage back then."

"What?" I whisper.

"I don't do that anymore and I do not condone that practice of the church any longer; bringing traumatized children here. While I do agree that we should do everything in our power to give them a safe environment, we shouldn't have... we should not have put a weapon in your hand when you should have been running around with toys," he says, a sudden sternness to his eyes. Regret too. "I was selfish and still dealing with my own trauma. You reminded me of my boy. I wanted you nearby. I wanted you safe, but I ended up putting you in harm's way. I should have gave you a choice--"

"I would have chosen to go with you," I interrupt. "You saved me and I had nowhere else to go. And that night, when I snuck out of the orphanage to... to jump from the cathedral, if you weren't there, I would have done it. I would have died. I'm alive because you were always there."

Olere smiles. "And I will always be."

I hope so.

Saying goodbye, I step out the door. I try not to look at the grounds, try to leave as swiftly as I can. There's this strange sensation in my chest, this longing to...

To see Lore. Of all fucking people. And I hate it. But it's also not that surprising. It's not like I will talk about what happened. I'm not going to sit with him and discuss how Olere may not be aware of *all* the wrongdoings of the church. He could be the great man I know he is, just an oblivious one as brainwashed and traumatized as the rest of us. *Brainwashed.* Oh Mothers, I'm starting to sound like Cyan.

I manage to call a car to take me to Lore's estate. I didn't even know he had one in the capital, but I suppose most rich bastards do. It doesn't have much on his home though; sitting as a tall townhouse among dozens more, in the richest part of town, of course. An unfamiliar maid answers when I knock. The workers must have been informed of who I am because she bows while granting me entrance.

"Where's Lore?" I ask. My gaze drifts through the foyer in search of him, not taking note of a damn thing other than his absence.

"I believe His Grace is in his office. Let me escort you," she says, already guiding me through the townhouse. Normally I'd be observing the new space, wondering what may be hidden where or what would be the fastest exit in case of an attack. But I'm not doing any of that. I'm just following a maid that walks too damn slow.

She knocks on Lore's office doors. I don't bother waiting for a response. She squeaks from my abrupt push of the doors. They slam shut behind me, leaving Lore and I alone.

"My, oh my," he says in that stupidly attractive voice. His eyes shimmer brighter than polished gems. Rising from his desk, he steps out from behind it to approach me donning a teasing grin. "You are getting quite comfortable in my presence to not even wait for my approv--"

I silence him through sheer surprise. Lore freezes when my forehead rests on his chest. I hear the softest intake of breath after my arms snake around his waist. I don't even know why I'm hugging him or why I want it so damn bad. I just know that I suddenly feel so much better. Like I can take a breath. And I do, one so deep that my lungs scream in appreciation for the much needed air.

"You're truly full of surprises," Lore whispers, sounding more cheerful than I think he meant to. He returns the gesture; hugging me while placing a hand in my hair to soothe my aching head. I feel his cheek press against my temple. I hold tighter, making him laugh. But he doesn't say more. Neither do I. I don't know if we really need to. Somehow the silence speaks for us.

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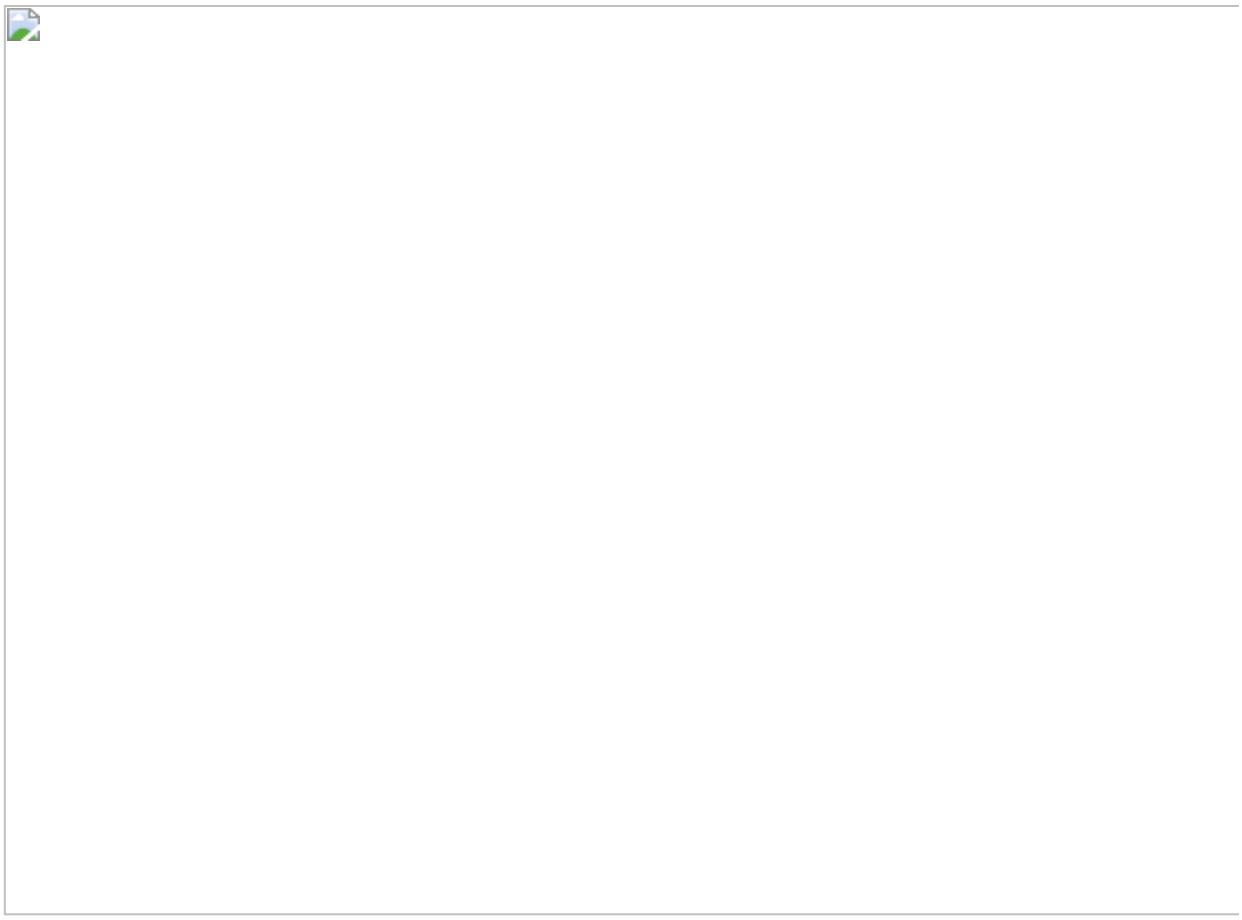
Well, well, well, Seren and Olere had their talk. Do you think Olere is hiding more or is he unaware of what the church may be up to? I really wanted to show more of their relationship and Olere's fatherly affection towards Seren. Seren has taken a lot of steps lately too. How are we feeling about that sweet little hug between Seren and Lore? ;D



63. Being Obvious

Much to my surprise, Lore doesn't press about my abrupt hugging. I'd like to think it's because he has the capability to understand that it's a matter I am not ready to discuss. But honestly, he's probably going to hold this incident against me to use at a later date. There is nothing more Lore than that.

He doesn't bring up the hug for the rest of the evening or the following day either. I'm able to visit Trinia again where I say hello to the trainees. Their eager expressions once brought me joy. I thought it to be an honor to receive their attention, to be told that they admire me, but now I wish they wouldn't. That they weren't here, that they were far away. But I force a smile because I can't help myself, let alone them. And I don't know what I want for myself, so I can't imagine what to tell them.

I also manage to ask around about Jakoby. A priestess informs me that he did arrive early, although she doesn't recall the church ever requesting anyone to arrive early for training. Perhaps I was misinformed? Regardless, he is no longer at Trinia or in the capital. He, along with some other priests in training, are traveling the countryside. I'll have to stop again once we return from Vexsis to see if he has returned.

Finally, the morning to take the airship to Vexsis arrives. Most of it goes by too quickly to recall. I remember waking up, eating breakfast but not tasting a bit of it, then we're standing in front of the airship station.

I thought Nosa's station was bad, but Rhamie's is even worse. People hurry past one another in a rush. Steam billows from the iron pipes, casting a heavy fog overhead. One woman stomps right past a whistling pipe threatening to burst without a care. She has a destination set in her mind and not even the threat of explosive heat in her face can stop her.

Then we arrive at the platform to gaze upon airships I've only seen from afar. Unlike airships created by mortals, the pure artistry of vampire

technology is indescribable. The airship hovers without whirling propellers that kick up debris and noise. They're completely silent with sheen silver sides that reflect the surroundings. In the sky, they're perfectly camouflage. But if you look at one from above, you'd see the overgrowth of trees and vines interwoven into the metal sheets as if the two have always been one in the same. A priest from Trinia once told me that vampire airships are actually fueled by the trees and running water onboard, but I couldn't possibly comprehend how. This, of itself, feels like magic.

Cyan shatters the moment with a quick question; "Suppose they would let me tear the airship apart?"

"Absolutely not," Lore answers.

Cyan whines. I've never seen someone fall in love at first sight until today. There may actually be hearts in Cyan's eyes. He's actually a little wobbly. Draven has to keep a firm grip on the sleeve of Cyan's jacket to keep the mad scientist from bolting in a desperate attempt to get his hands on the wiring of our ship. Cyan gazes upon the technology like a new found lover whom he wishes to dance with under the starlight. Draven might end up getting a bit jealous of a piece of machinery.

A bell chimes signaling we may board. The crowd surges forward. Cyan walks behind Lore and me with Draven at the back, keeping a watchful eye on any who dare get too close to Cyan. Maybe Cyan would be blushing about that if he weren't so transfixed on the airship. I think a bit of drool leaks out of his parted lips.

"Don't let the beauty fool you," Lore whispers. He has leaned towards me so his breath tickles my cheek. "There are many enemies within and even more waiting for us in Vexsis."

"I am well aware. You've reminded me at least a dozen times now." And that's only counting today. Lore has repeated the threat as if he believes it would ward off evil. I'm of the belief that it'd merely cause that threat to come to life.

"I only hope that by mentioning it, you will remember the chaperones to come. That there may be laws in place to prevent us from harming one another, but that does not guarantee our safety. Vampires, particularly those of Vexsis, are rather tricky when they need to be."

"Showing me so much concern, I'm flattered, but I will now remind you that I am perfectly capable of handling myself."

"I know. I simply can't help but to take care of my..." Lore glances at me for a brief moment, though still long enough to make my mouth run dry. "Partner."

It feels like he wanted to say something else. Something more. And I stupidly wish he would have...

The wall of the airship opens. Lore rests a hand on my back when I almost stumble back in surprise. I didn't even know there was a door! The doors are so seamless that they... well, there aren't any seams!

I whistle as we pass through the entrance of the ship that makes our last look like the inside of a dumpster. The halls move like water, lacking pointed corners by replacing them with rounded bends. Slightly curved columns mimicking curves in a stream lift up a rounded ceiling where heavenly light filters in from above. Vines twist along the ceiling where flowers bloom and trees reach across open walkways. It doesn't feel like a ship. It feels like a pristine, white cottage nestled in nature.

The initial comfort dissipates when I take in the other passengers. Though Draven guides us through the halls to first find our rooms, others do the same making the halls a bit of a mess. I see them; vampires and dhampir in droves. The opposite of our last airship where the majority were mortal. There's a level of uneasiness, a cold sensation at the back of my neck.

"Here we are," Draven announces upon the arrival to our rooms. Then he glances left to right. "Where'd Cyan go?"

Lore pinches the bridge of his nose. "I told him that we're meant to stay together."

"I will search for him. He's likely picking apart the wall to see how this place ti--"

"I'll have you know!" Cyan interjects, appearing beside me. "That I was *admiring* some fine craftsmanship right at the end of the hall. I wasn't even out of sight, you worrying dingbats."

"If we didn't see you then you were out of sight," Draven counters.

Cyan shrugs. "Or you're going blind in your old age." His gaze drifts to Lore's suddenly very pointed stare. "I... uh... take that back and deeply apologize for daring to imply something so audacious, Your Grace."

"Good decision," Lore says when stepping into our room. Cyan clears his throat and follows Draven into their room.

Lore grabs a pamphlet from the bedside table to begin listing off the available options on the airship. Although I remind him that we aren't on vacation, he continues treating it as one. Waltzing back out the door, we meet up with Cyan and Draven to begin our leisurely day aboard the ship. More time is spent watching Cyan frantically examine every nook and cranny. I never thought I'd find watching a mad man amusing, yet here we are.

Cyan picks and prods, even stopping some who appear to be workers on the vessel to make inquiries. Draven has to drag him away by the shirt collar like a hound to get him to stop. By lunch, we've barely seen much of the ship. Except Cyan. He managed to shimmy his way into an air duct--I don't know how he found it-- that Draven had to rip him out of. That one really is a firecracker.

Later in the day, we step into the dining area. Cyan and I come to an abrupt halt to gaze upward at the... floating water?

"It's an anti-gravity mechanism," Lore explains, which is no explanation at all.

"Divinity?" I inquire.

"Science, it's--"

"Fucking brilliant!" Cyan gapes, almost stumbling down the steps leading to the center of the dining room. He stands at the center, gazing upward. His neck has to hurt at the angle. "I always knew we were behind vampire technology by leaps and bounds, but this is a whole other level. We don't have any form of gravitational tech."

"We have divinity, which can do that," I say, pointing above. Once I realized it isn't divinity, it isn't as impressive, but Cyan gives me the death glare.

"Not everyone is capable of magic, but anyone can be a part of this," he argues. "If we have technology that anyone can use, isn't that better than limiting it to those lucky enough to be born with magic?"

"I suppose... that's true."

"This is incredible, this... this..." Cyan squeaks when Draven taps his shoulder.

"This is not something they will share with you," Draven says, causing the enthusiastic scientist to pout. "And this is a dining hall. Take a seat and get something to eat."

"I am eating. Eating knowledge." Cyan snickers while following us to a table.

I barely had time to sit down before Lore says, "Excuse me. I'll be right back."

"Where are you..." The words fall short as I watch Lore leave to approach a man at the bar across the room. Music playing from the nearby band echoes in the room, making it impossible to hear what they're saying. They clearly know one another, offering enthusiastic greetings including a friendly hug that lasts longer than necessary. Not that I'm counting how long they hug for. That'd totally be weird.

"Do you know who that is?" I ask Draven, who lifts his gaze from Cyan's menu. I didn't even notice he was helping Cyan pick something to eat.

Draven glances at Lore and the stranger, who rests his hand on Lore's atop the bar. "I believe that's Lord Phaeron. They attended college classes together in Vexsis and have quite a few business ventures together. It's good we've run into him. His Grace wanted to have a meeting before this incident."

Oh, are they just business partners then, is a question that crosses my mind but doesn't pass my lips. Regardless, the question seems to have been answered based on Lore and Phaeron's demeanor towards each other. Phaeron has slipped his fingers between Lore's and he listens intently with a seductive smile. What is with this damn dhampir and having relations with everyone we're happening to run into?!

I veer away with a determined clear of my throat. Ignoring Cyan and Draven's gazes, I focus on the menu that makes me momentarily gag. This is primarily a vampire and dhampir vessel meaning the menu consists mostly of bloody beverages and meals. Pigs marinated in blood wine or raw versions of meat topped in steamed vegetables. This must be why Draven was assisting Cyan. I don't know what's safe to eat until I reach the back of the menu where there are a total of five meals available under *Mortal Menu* . Which sounds more like mortals are *on* the menu than what we can eat.

Moments later, a waiter takes our orders. Lore has yet to return. I gaze over my shoulder, scowling upon catching Phaeron now standing and leaning awfully close to Lore. The lord happens to catch my gaze. His lips twitch back into a grin. He nods towards me. I barely turn away in time to prevent Lore from catching me staring. Unfortunately, I didn't stop Cyan or Draven from noticing. Cyan sits across from me, lips twisted into an exaggerated frown.

"What?" I hiss.

Cyan rests his arm on the table. "You might as well walk over and slap Lord Phaeron in the face. It'd be less obvious."

"Less obvious?" I mock. "Don't speak to me about being less obvious when you *and* Draven can't keep yourselves from ogling each other when the other's back is turned. You might as well kiss him square on the mouth so we all can stop pretending that we don't notice."

Both gape. Then Cyan barks out a perturbed hey when I stand.

I'm not up for this continuous stress. First there's the church, my never ending back and forth between what I want, what I need, and what I'm meant to do. Then I'm surrounded by enemies and on my way to the most dangerous place for someone like me. And now Cyan's trying to point out my... my fucking affections for Lore! Damn it all. I don't need that right now. Fuck!

I storm off, heading through the halls with no clear destination, unaware of who follows until minutes later. He presses a firm hand against my shoulder. "You can't go off alone," Draven states.

"We're on a fucking airship--"

"And two priests were killed on the last one."

"Oh how marvelously observant of you." I snap, pivoting on my heel to glare up at him. "Why must I remind you lot that I'm a paladin? Those on board this ship are in far more danger than I am. And right now, this very dangerous paladin wishes to be alone."

Draven offers a sinister smile that makes his orange eyes crinkle. "That's unfortunate because I have orders that you aren't allowed to be alone."

This rotten bastard is really testing my patience.

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Our group has almost made it to Vexsis. Writing a jealous Seren is a lot of fun tbh lol What do you think about the difference of technology between humans and vampires? How fun is it to see these fools call each other out? xD

64. Losing the Game

A determined Draven sits next to me at another bar I discovered across the ship. I feel his gaze when I get a drink that never touches my lips. Alcohol and I have never been friends. Often going on missions to find vampires, I couldn't risk drinking. Even now, I think of all the possible scenarios that could arise should I become inebriated.

"Why are we at a bar if you aren't going to drink?" he asks, taking a swig of a red liquid that must be some form of blood. I'm fairly certain he ordered it on purpose to make me gag.

"Why don't you tell Cyan how you really feel about him?" I counter, grinning at the slight twitch in his fingers.

"Is it truly that obvious?" he asks, stumping me. I expected an immediate aversion that he could conjure easily enough, which leaves me sputtering long enough for him to elaborate, "Cyan and me. Are we that obvious?"

"Uh... well, yeah. Cyan much more than you, but the signs are there." My fingers tap against the glass. "Why are you suddenly talking to me about this?" I ask.

Draven chugs his drink and taps the bar to signal for another. "It's easier to talk to someone you don't give a damn about."

"Wow, for a butler you are pretty shit at coating things in sugar. Are you planning to tell me why there has never been an advancement in your relationship? Because from where I'm sitting, you both want that."

"Cyan's not that confident when it comes to relationships."

"Your distant attitude doesn't help. I can still barely believe you have basic functioning emotions even after witnessing the two of you."

Scowling, Draven takes another drink. Seems he is well aware of that, but doesn't quite succeed in stopping himself from upsetting the little firecracker. Can't say I blame him. Cyan's like an eternally burning match. His flame never quite sputters out. Should you risk getting close, he may burn you, but staying away doesn't feel possible either. For Draven, that fire is much more intense.

"It's complicated," Draven mutters, gazing distantly at his drink. He stands prior to further questioning. "I've been babysitting you long enough. Don't start trouble."

"You're actually leaving me alone?" I ask although he has already turned his back to me. Draven waves dismissively, then disappears out of the bar.

Well, that wasn't as deep of a conversation as I was expecting. But I also wasn't expecting Draven to say a damn thing at all. He must be having troubling thoughts of his own. Thoughts that make him question himself and what he wants to do, like I'm having right now.

My chest aches when the memory of Lore next to Phaeron flashes in my mind. I recall their hands intertwined atop the bar. For a brief moment, I see my hand there instead. I slam my drink back because... because who fucking cares who Lore sleeps with?! It's none of my business. I don't care if he and Phaeron had something or if they decided to rekindle that old flame. Not my business, just like it wasn't my business before. Besides, I can get someone too! I'm attractive--

"Seren."

Son of a bitch, I just got rid of Draven! Can't I have a moment of reprieve?

Forcing a smile, I spin in the seat to look back at Lore. He approaches the bar to take the seat Draven once possessed.

"Didn't I say that you aren't--"

"Draven left about twenty seconds ago. I'm surprised you didn't see him leave," I interject with an exhausted sigh. A bowl of mints rests nearby. I

grab one from the pile to tug on the wrapper impatiently and as an excuse to look at it rather than him.

"And I'd like it if you left too because I need some time alone. Besides, don't you want to catch up with Lord Phaeron?" I ask.

"Lord Phaeron?" Lore repeats. I feel his gaze burning into my neck as I unwrap the mint. "My, oh my, I know everyone has an addiction, but I'm amazed that I happen to be yours."

"I beg your pardon?" I cough.

"Don't fret too much," Lore whispers against my lips. I don't even know how he got there so fast. I heave a long breath, incapable of thought, let alone movement when he says, "I can't quite get enough of you either, my sweet Seren."

The desert is a watery oasis compared to the barren wasteland of my mouth.

"No need to get so jealous though. Nothing happened between Lord Phaeron and me. We had business matters to discuss, that's all," he adds and does exactly what I imagined earlier. His hand moves across the bar to slip his fingers between mine. They're warm and slender, un-calloused and smooth. Makes me think of my own, how they're nothing like that. My palms are calloused and rough from years of training. They're littered with so many small scars that I don't remember where each is from. Lore's fingers pass over them mindlessly, making my skin break out with goosebumps.

"I don't care if anything happened," I mumble, finally removing my hand from his. "Your love life, sex life, whatever, is none of my concern."

"Oh?" Lore tilts his head forward as if to close the already minimal gap between us. *I want him to.*

"Then you wouldn't mind if I did take Phaeron up on his offer to share a bed with him this evening?" he adds.

I swallow hard. "No, I wouldn't."

There's a challenge in his eyes, one I fear I cannot win. Right now, Lore reminds me of the moment before a great storm. I sense the turbulence to come. I know the havoc it will bring. But I love the smell of rain and the flash of lightning within dark clouds.

"It's late. We should head back to our rooms," I somehow manage to speak. Then I pop the mint between my teeth and--Lore leans in. He catches the piece between his own teeth. Our lips barely brush as he steals the candy in one swift movement. He grasps my hand once more, rubbing his fingers against my shaking palm.

"Consider that the candy I've been owed," he says with a lick of his devilish lips. And that's when I lose the game. The one we've been dancing around for ages. The one I've been terrified of losing because nothing good can come from kissing Lore. But, apparently, I'm very tired of being good.

I kiss him. My hand twists into his braided hair that must now look a mess. Not that he seems to care because he leans into me, kissing hard as his hand grips my thigh. I press my tongue against his lips. The taste of mint passes into my mouth. By the Mothers, kissing Lore doesn't feel like any kiss I've had before. He's what you're told you can't have and it makes you want him all the more. He's everything I never thought I wanted and I can't get enough. He's so much more. A sense of dread, like I've swam too far out to sea and find myself hovering within darkness with nowhere to go. And a sense of excitement. Adrenaline courses through me, faster than all the times my life was at risk, and somehow even more exhilarating. Like my life is far more at risk with his lips against mine and I love it.

We break apart heaving long, unsteady breaths. I suck on the remainder of the mint sitting on the tip of my tongue. Then the sounds come flooding in. The chatter of others in the bar. Their footsteps across the room. Reality hits. My eyes open to find Lore watching me with swollen lips that almost make me kiss him again.

"Seren," he calls. And I run.

The chair stumbles from my abrupt exit. I hear Lore calling after me. Those in the halls hiss when I run past, ramming my shoulder into a few people and almost breaking a man's suitcase by stumbling over it. My ankle throbs from the impact, but I keep running with no clear destination.

Out of all the things Lore has done, making me like him has been the biggest betrayal. He's everything I hate wrapped in gaudy packaging to make him look like anything but trouble. But the more I tear apart the wrappings to see what's inside, the more I realize he's the most troubling thing imaginable. And that troubling thing now has me wrapped so tightly around his finger that I'm not so sure I can escape. I don't know if I want to.

I hate him. I hate him. I hate him for how he makes me think, how he makes me feel, how he tears me apart at the seams so easily. He smiles afterwards like it's no big deal. Like this is a fun game that will end with ease while I know it'll end in tragedy. More on my part than his. What am I meant to do around a man who is everything I hate while simultaneously everything I've ever wanted?

I don't know how long I walk the halls, checking around every corner to ensure Lore doesn't appear. Eventually, the halls go quiet. I wish my mind would do the same. My eyes feel heavy, but there's no way I'm sharing a room with Lore after...

I run my tongue over my bottom lip.

A few moments later, I find myself in front of Draven and Cyan's door. I knock and am not surprised by Cyan's scowl when he answers.

"What do you want in the middle of the fucking night?" he asks, then grunts when I push past him.

"I'm staying here tonight," I declare.

"What? No--" Cyan actually squeaks when I face him, my smile so big that it's painful.

"I said. I'm staying here tonight."

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Early update because I honestly just wanted to get to the kiss scene lol Fun fact: Seren and Lore still kissed before Aron and Quinton did. The kings of slow burn remain lol Anywho, we've finally got to the point where Seren's feelings took over and he kissed Lore. Will these two be able to deal with their feelings for each other? Do they have the time to even do so when they're almost to Vexsis? Will Cyan and Draven dare to argue against Seren about sleeping in their room?! Tune in next time to find out! XD

65. Curiosity Killed the Cat

Cyan P.O.V.

Seren struts across the room to take a seat on the edge of Draven's bed, who appears to be very displeased when he exits the bathroom. Fresh out of a shower, Draven stands frozen with a towel on his head. His hair's damp. A slight sheen rests atop his porcelain skin. His clothes stick to his muscular frame that I've often wondered--I bite my lip. My mouth runs dry. I squirm in place, unsure of where to look. I know where I want to look, but getting all worked up would be a very bad idea. Although, for me, it's always a bad idea. My brain's short circuiting, isn't it? Yeah... yeah...

Draven's orange eyes narrow on Seren, then drift to me in silent questioning.

"Don't look at me. I have no idea what the greasy grub-fuck is doing," I declare.

Seren doesn't respond nor react to my insult. He doesn't normally, but there's something in his brown eyes that tells me he didn't hear a damn thing I said. He's as vacant as a jar of cookies after the gremlins back home got their hands in it.

"Is there a reason you've invaded our room?" Draven inquires. When Seren doesn't respond, Draven approaches his bed to kick the crusty cabbage in the shin. Seren jolts. His gaze returns from lala land to focus on Draven, who repeats the question; "I asked, is there a reason you've invaded our room?"

"I'm sleeping here," Seren states the same words he spoke to me earlier, only without the murderous smile that made me glad I've been sleeping with a knife under my pillow.

"Are you implying that you plan for us to share a bed?"

"You could share Cyan's bed."

I would literally die, that murderous bastard.

"You lousy shit fungus!" I point accusingly at the bed stealer. "You can't storm into our room demanding we change our sleeping arrangements because of a reason you won't share."

"I can't imagine what reason would make a Paladin of the Holy Church rather risk sharing a bed with a vampire than a room with a dhampir," Draven adds. I try not to focus on how he's implying he would still share a bed with Seren over sharing with me. I tell myself it's because he's being courteous, but there's always a whisper in the back of all our minds that tells the most terrible things.

He doesn't want to be around you.

He's annoyed at the mere thought of how dramatic you'll be if he so much as grazes you.

He's disgusted by you.

"Did something happen with His Grace?" Draven asks after Seren doesn't respond, bringing me back to reality.

Huffing, the paladin rolls onto his side to face his back to us. "Nothing happened."

"Your actions and tone say otherwi--" Draven grunts when a pillow is launched expertly at his face. He manages to catch said pillow prior to it falling to the floor. "How mature of you."

"You can go share the room with Lore or stay here, your choice!" Seren kicks up the blankets and throws himself under them as if that will prevent Draven from tossing him out of the room.

Draven looks at me. Orange eyes as brilliant as flames make me short of breath as if this is the first I've seen them. Then he sighs, dropping the

pillow in defeat. "So be it, although I cannot guarantee His Grace won't come storming in here to retrieve his original roommate."

"Tell him; if he tries, I'll shave his head in his sleep."

"Do I not get a say in this?" I ask with a raise of my hand. Draven walks by my bed to head for the door. I hurry to follow, narrowly catching him prior to stepping outside. "Hey, why am I babysitting shit for brains?"

"Because you two get along better--don't make that face. You know what I mean."

I continue making the face. "No, I do not. Explain."

"The two of you have more in common. Maybe you'll get him to admit to why he stole my bed."

And stole our evening together. It's not as if Draven and I are superb conversationalists, but it's time together nonetheless. I hate it. And I love it. I want less. And I want so much more. I wish to bask in this time together, but also run a thousand miles away. There's so much I want from Draven that it frightens me. What frightens me most is how he would react if he learned the truth because he doesn't want the same from me. I couldn't stomach the look of disgust or maybe even pity that he'd make as he tried to politely get me to fuck off.

"What if..." I clear my throat. "What if I don't want to interrogate him?"

"Cyan, your curiosity has always known very little bounds. It is your greatest strength and your ultimate weakness." With a devious smirk, he leaves. He didn't even grant me the time to contemplate whether that was an insult or a compliment.

...and he's right. I really am the worst when it comes to keeping my nose out of things. It's one of the reasons I had to leave the church. Knowing too much is sometimes as bad as knowing too little. Yet I dive head first into every question in hopes to find an answer because I'm a stubborn bastard like that.

"Saying nothing happened is the best way to inform others that something *did* happen," I say, almost wanting to pinch myself for not lasting more than a few seconds. I could have at least pretended not to care for a few minutes, but my mouth rarely ever coordinates with my brain.

Seren doesn't respond. There's a stiffness to his shoulders that I haven't seen since he first arrived at the estate. Over the time Seren has been among us, he has gotten more and more comfortable; physically comfortable. He stopped always reaching for the axe on his back when he heard so much as a squeak of a floorboard. He stopped searching for exits when outnumbered in a room. Tense shoulders started to relax until one might think he had never been uncomfortable at all. But that tension has started to return ever since...

"When you visited Trinia, did you talk to anyone?" I ask, observing that tension turn Seren stiff as a board.

Seconds pass, then minutes. I suspect he won't answer until he finally replies, "Yes, I spoke to Olere."

"The Champion?"

Seren peeks over his shoulder, revealing dark but inquisitive eyes. "You know him?"

"Only in name. You know how stories of champions passed around the trainees. And I might have seen him on the grounds once or twice, but that's it."

Seren rolls onto his other side to face me. Though his expression remains apathetic, it's far more telling than showing emotion. It says he's hiding far more than he's willing to share. "Do you..." He swallows hard. "Do you believe there are good people at the church?"

The question stumps even my mouthy self into silence. Maybe because I asked myself the same question years ago, when I was stuck at the church surrounded by people who raised me, but I so desperately wanted to leave. Then I would look at a friend who told me jokes, made me laugh and smile

on dark days, and I simply couldn't imagine they were bad even after all I started to suspect about the church. Those same friends would condemn me now if we ran into each other. I'd like to think I'd give them the finger and tell them to fuck off, but I don't know if I would because...

"I don't think I believe in good and evil," I say. "I believe there are choices that depend on too many factors to count. We make those choices. Live with them. Hopefully learn from them. An evil person may be good to someone else. A good person may be evil to someone else. Most of us fall between those lines because life is a giant fuckfest that no one will ever properly navigate."

"Giant fuckfest?" Seren chuckles softly. "And here I thought you were getting philosophical on me."

"Not really my style."

"So it seems." His soft smile fades, replaced by a furrowed brow. His eyes search me for an answer I doubt I can give. Squeezing the pillow until his fingers threaten to rip the fabric, he whispers so quietly I strain to hear him; "Then, do you think if I... if someone like me were to leave the church, I wouldn't be an evil person running from the truth?"

Leave the church rings in my ears louder than those damned church bells that woke us at the ass crack of dawn. I stare for a long moment at Seren, who heaves a breath so heavy that it makes my own lungs ache.

"Am I not an evil man trying to escape a past that I don't deserve to escape from?" he adds with the most subdued whimper I've ever heard.

What the fuck am I meant to say? Hell, why did he have to reveal that to me? This is why I need to damn my curiosity to a metaphorical hell. I dug too deep and now he's expecting comfort or an honest answer that doesn't come to mind. The only words I manage to get out are a soft spoken question; "Are you really considering leaving the church?"

Because the Seren who arrived on our doorstep sure as hell wouldn't.

The silence he gives in return speaks more than words. I could pry more. I could poke the nerve he has exposed until it bleeds and blisters, but I don't because maybe very, very, very deep down, I've always wanted this to be the outcome. Seeing another view the Holy Church as what it truly is, freeing them from a place we were told to love because we had no other options, it feels good.

"I left the church too, remember?" I finally speak up, squirming under Seren's intense stare. "I was in your place once, striving to become a beloved member of the church that raised me--"

"But you stopped," he interrupts, a sudden coldness brimming in his eyes. "You left without going through the trials, didn't you? Before becoming immune to blight and... and the knighting ceremony."

Where you kill an orange or even gold eyed vampire in front of your peers to prove your strength.

"Have you ever killed someone?" he asks, expecting me to say no. I'm so utterly relieved that he doesn't give me the chance to respond, that he's so overwhelmed by his own issues that he doesn't hear the shudder in my breath. Even after this, I don't think I could tell him.

"I have killed plenty of times. Too many times to count," he whispers. Although his eyes are on me, they do not see me. They're looking at something else. "At first, I hesitated, but now it's natural. I take their breath away as easily as I breathe. And even if I feel guilty, I know I could do it again and again, and I'd still be damn good at it, because it's natural and it will always be natural. How can killing someone be natural?"

"Seren--"

"I'm tired, I... we should rest," he interrupts, returning to laying on his opposite side.

It seems my curiosity subsides when there's a chance another's curiosity may be piqued. The idea of speaking with Seren more and where that may lead zips my mouth up real quick. I turn to my side too, keeping our backs

to each other in hopes he won't accidentally catch the expression I know I'm wearing. The expression of terror as I try not to shut my tired eyes because I fear what I'll see.

The man with crooked teeth. His lecherous smile. The stench of alcohol and cigarettes. Fire. Roaring flames. Dead eyes staring up at me.

I don't want to sleep.

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Cyan and Seren have had another discussion concerning the church. Seren seems to be seriously considering leaving. Will Cyan discuss this with anyone? Should he? And what kind of nightmare is he trying to escape? If you want more detailed backstories about Seren, Lore, and Cyan, I do have a few extra chapters available on my patreon. You can read them all for $2, so long as you read it in the month that you're subscribed to patreon :)

66. Back to You

Seren P.O.V.

Warning: Mature content. Please keep comments respectful.

I lay awake through the night aware that Cyan does the same. I hear his occasional deep intake of breath. He must hear my own. I wish I could calm myself, but the memories take me down a raging river that rarely relents.

What happened with Lore--the kiss--then speaking to Cyan, it's too much. It's too much that every passing moment I find myself leaning further and further away from what has been such a sturdy foundation in my life; the church. It's as if I thought I built myself a forever home only to discover the ground has grown soggy. The floors creak and walls crack until windows shatter and the roof caves in around me. I breathe in debris that burns my lungs, uncertain if I wish to fall into the depths with the home or claw my way out, unaware of what awaits me afterwards.

When day breaks, Cyan rises wordlessly. He's ready for the day before Draven arrives. I'm brushing my teeth in the bathroom when the butler knocks. It's time for breakfast. A refusal rests on my tongue until Cyan peeks into the bathroom from the slightly ajar door.

"Don't skip breakfast," he says as if he can read my thoughts, or it's because he had the same urge but knew better. "We reach Vexsis today. We should keep up our strength, just in case."

He's right. If I were in my right mind, I'd have immediately thought the same. I wouldn't hesitate to agree. Cyan waits for my response that comes in the form of a slow nod. He leaves. I follow shortly afterwards, dressed in the same suit from yesterday. I'm almost tempted to step into my shared room with Lore to get a change of clothes. Wearing this suit reminds me of the kiss. There's the faintest scent of alcohol. But when I catch Lore's gaze

as he stands outside our room, I walk past him, beyond relieved that he doesn't utter a word.

Conversation passes between Lore, Cyan, and Draven throughout breakfast. I catch very brief moments where they discuss Vexsis. Though I know I should be listening with rapt attention--we are about to enter the worst place someone like me could ever go--I can't quite grasp reality. There's thoughts from last night. I still taste Lore. I still feel his heat. I hear his sharp intake of breath, see his lustrous blue eyes that ensnared me the moment I gazed upon them. Then I look to my side and see Lore here, now, the width of his shoulders and long black hair all draped over his form to show off his brilliant profile. When my staring is caught, he offers a devilish wink that has me pushing away from the table.

Lore grasps my wrist. "We're meant to stay toge--"

"I can take care of myself," I interject, ripping my hand free before I make a horrible mistake, like kissing him again.

He doesn't argue. I wouldn't have stayed if he had an argument to give. I move through the halls to the observation deck above protected by a glass dome that allows everyone to peer through the clouds to the looming crimson tear in the sky.

The Gateway is more than I could have ever imagined. Even while plainly visible from the capital, the distance never let me truly understand the grandeur. It rips across the sky like a bloodied scar. Crimson mists seeps around the black edges that glimmer like starlight. Within, the red moves like stirred wine. The captain speaks over the intercom, informing everyone that we'll be passing through in a few minutes and to either take a seat or hold on to something. Apparently, passing through can cause one to go a bit dizzy.

I grip the railing along the dome, one of many passengers watching the Gateway grow closer until red fills our vision. When the airship pushes through, the fog encapsulates us in a sea of crimson that darkens into an ebony sky of starlight, as if we can see the space we're moving between. In another flash of red, we breach the other side to peer upon rolling fields

tinted blue from the sun. I didn't expect that, although I guess it's the moon that is known to be red in Vexsis. Far in the distance, I catch soft glints of shimmering white; likely the capital city.

Just then, my sight goes blurry. I almost lost hold of the handlebars. A pressure rests against my hip, easing me onto steady feet. I blink away the blurriness to look over my shoulder.

Of course it's Lore standing there. He at least releases me without my having to say so. Then again, I doubt I would have said anything. Cyan and Draven are with him, albeit a few steps away. After last night, they don't need more reason to suspect something happened between Lore and me. Although, Cyan isn't paying attention with his face crushed against the glass.

"Careful," Lore says, "Vexsis can be a bit disorienting in the beginning. The light's different, even the air is in a sense. Nothing to worry about, of course, but some are nauseous on the first day."

"I'll be fine," I say, taking a step away. I could feel his chest brush against my shoulder, his heat and his scent washing over me. I can't stand it.

"Strange how another world looks so similar, isn't it?" Lore asks. "Is it what you expected?"

"No," I admit, observing the land beneath us.

Though we're high up, I see the plots of land below no different than the farms on earth. I know vampires add fruits, vegetables, and grains to their blood meals, but I can't deny that whenever anyone mentioned farming on Vexsis, I imagined metal rooms where mortals were locked up with tubes draining the blood from their veins.

"We'll reach the capital sometime around lunch," Lore explains, although I already know. It's his poor attempt to make conversation, to lead up to; "So I think that means we have time to talk."

Lore grasps my wrist once more when I try to make my escape. He tugs me towards him. I stumble over my feet. I said I'll be fine, but Lore was right. Vexsis is a bit disorienting. The colors alone make my gaze drift, like I know something's amiss and I'm searching for what needs to be fixed.

"Seren, last night--"

"Was a mistake," I interject, attention drifting to Draven a few steps away. Sure enough, those orange eyes of his are focused on us. I try to keep a calm facade when I hiss, "Forget it happened."

"I can't do that. More importantly, I don't want to."

"Well I do." I rip my hand away. "And stop making a scene. Draven's--"

"Already aware something happened after you evicted him from his room last night. Pretending won't fool him, so how about we take this chat to our room if he makes you so uncomfortable?"

"No, absolutely not. I'm not--" *risking being alone with you because I want you. I want you so bad it hurts. I want to kiss you. I want to hold you. I want to run my fingers through your hair. I want to do so much more. I don't know if I can say no to that desire anymore.*

"You're not what?" Lore challenges. He takes a looming step closer. I stand my ground, even when I feel his chest against mine, when he leans in like last night. Like he's going to kiss me, like he wants all the same things I want.

"You don't want to be alone with me?" he asks, gently gripping my wrist so his fingers rest over my pulse. "Are you afraid of what will happen?"

Not might, but *will* . What we both know will happen and I can't...

Suddenly, Lore releases me. He retreats. The absence of his heat leaves me freezing. His eyes darken when he asks, "Was last night a joke?"

"What?" I hiss.

"Last night--our kiss--was it a joke? Am I a joke to you?"

"No. Don't be ridiculous."

"I don't find this to be a ridiculous question to ask, all things considered."

"All things considered, you're smart enough to catch on to the fact that I like--" I bite my tongue too late. Finished thought or not, Lore knew what I was about to say. So do I. He watches me for a brief moment, as if he expects me to dare to complete that sentence or he desperately hopes that I will. When I don't, his hand grasps mine.

Lore has us speeding down the steps in the direction of our room.

"Wait a second!" I call.

"You're crazier than I ever thought possible if you think I'll wait any longer," he says. His fingers slip between mine, linking us.

We could stop. I could pull away, tell him to drop it, that I wasn't about to say what he thought I was, but the words never pass my lips. My heart won't allow the lie. My heart doesn't even want to acknowledge that what's about to happen is going to be a bigger mistake than last night.

Only the heart can silence the mind and that's why I do nothing to stop Lore from kissing me the moment we're alone in our room. Right now, my heart doesn't give a damn what my mind has to say. Lore's here with me. We're alone. All I want is him. We have this moment, so we must seize it. Bask in it. Never let it go.

I press my hands against Lore's shoulders. He grunts when his back meets the wall. My tongue runs over the roof of his mouth, tasing him. A soft moan escapes his parted lips when I retreat for air. Then his hand is on the back of my neck, bringing me in for another kiss. He doesn't taste like mint tonight. He tastes like red wine, but far more intoxicating, like I've gotten drunk off the mere brush of his tongue over mine. Holy Mothers, I can't stand this infuriating dhampir that's always a step ahead of me, as if he's playing with my mind, and now my body. But I don't want to break away. I

want to keep a firm hold on his hips, kiss his lips until they swell, and mark his neck so any pest that gets too close knows to back off. I'm doing that now, sucking at the pulse point of his neck.

What am I doing? What are we doing?

Lore's fingers tangle themselves in my hair. One powerful tug and I retreat, moaning when Lore returns the favor, hungrily kissing my neck. All my life, I've known not to let a vampire or dhampir near my neck. Now, I don't want Lore to stop.

This isn't right. I'm a paladin of the Holy Church. Here, like this, with a dhampir, I'm...

He kisses beneath my jaw, down the slope of my neck until his teeth graze the skin of my pulse. A shiver passes through me, one he notices based on the smirk I feel atop my goosebump covered skin. I should be terrified that he'll bite, that his blight will make me woozy. Maybe this is all a very elaborate trap. But then Lore leans up to kiss my lips instead, gentle and quick and far more powerful than any bite. I'm not woozy. I'm completely drunk off him.

I shouldn't be. I can't be. I can't be.

We stumble from the wall. Lore kisses me hard. His hands come down to work at the buttons of my shirt. One after the other until the garment hits the floor. I don't know when I removed his jacket or began to work on the buttons of his vest. All I remember is seeing the fabric drift to our feet, his shirt almost joining them until I feel Lore's hand slip beneath my pants.

"Wait," I mutter, taking firm hold of his wrist. I bite back a whimper. My body absolutely despises me for not letting Lore continue, but sudden terror rises in my gut. "I, uh, this... we-we shouldn't be like this."

"Why not?" he kisses me, bites at my bottom lip, reminding me why I'm a fool for not giving him everything. But the voice remains in the back of my mind, screaming like a terrified caged animal. Terrified of a rod beating against my knuckles, terrified of disappointed eyes, terrified of losing what

little I have left, terrified of what this all means and where I--where we go from here.

"You know why," I say, but kiss him anyway.

Lore grasps my chin. We break apart, breathing each other. His nose brushes mine. My eyes flutter open, captured by Lore's gaze; the bright blue of clear ocean water drifting over the shoreline. I fear where that ocean will take me. At the same time, I can't wait to see where we'll go.

"Do you want me?" He asks, kissing me slowly. "Because I want you, Seren."

I grip his hips so hard I fear I might bruise him. "The church--"

"Does not control you," he interrupts. "Your life cannot revolve around them, around what they want of you. You must decide what you want from this life."

"I... I don't know what I want. I don't even know where to start."

Lore takes my hand to press a long kiss against my palm. "Start here," he says and drops to his knees. "Start with me."

Watching Lore lazily kiss at my hip, I couldn't say no even if I wanted to. I don't really think this is much of a choice. Not that I'll voice that now, as my pants and underwear fall around my ankles. Lore pushes me back to the bed where I sit up on my elbows to watch him kiss my trembling thighs. It's not as if this is my first time, but I somehow feel even more nervous when Lore grips the base of my cock. A low groan escapes me, one that has him smirking. He pumps his hand slowly, continuing to kiss at my thigh, then my hip. It feels too fast, like too much. I can't concentrate or think and that's probably for the best. A tsunami of emotions swells within me, accompanied by immense pleasure when Lore's warm breath brushes my arousal. Then I can't hold back the moan when his mouth moves over my cock.

To think the always witty and snarky Lord of Silra is now using that often annoying mouth for far more pleasurable reasons. But even like this, he has to be a bastard. He moves slowly at first, almost lazy as he sucks my tip. His hand works my base, pumping me in time with his mouth. My thighs tremble, breaths coming out uneven then quick when Lore suddenly takes me to the hilt. I throw back my head, moaning after his ministrations quicken.

My mind goes numb. Not thinking of anything other than this moment. Desperate for another, for this to last forever. Everything is too intense, his touch, this pleasure, the sensation of drowning in my own feelings that can't determine which direction to go. My fingers twist into Lore's hair, the other grips the bed as if I need it to remind me this is reality. To keep me grounded as Lore drives my senses wild. My hips wish to thrust into his mouth, into the overwhelming heat continuing to envelop me until my senses fire off like broken wires. White begins to line my vision. I fall back onto the bed when my orgasm hits me. Pure pleasure rippling through me as I cry out Lore's name like a broken record. I feel his smirk against my hip when he kisses my trembling thighs.

"You know, back at the club--" Lore kisses my hip. "When we were playing partners--" He kisses my chest. "I wish I had gotten your pants off then--" He marks my neck. "I knew I'd like what you were hiding from me." He kisses me hard, resting his body against me.

"Don't talk about my dark past." I laugh, grabbing his hips to tug on the hem of his pants. Maybe I'd hesitate if I weren't so taken, so far gone that I couldn't find my way back even if I truly wanted to.

He chuckles against my lips. "We'll have to go again sometime. They really did have some very interesting toys."

I refuse to respond, fearful of what I might say, that I may agree to this becoming our norm and what that would mean. Lore has that power over me, something almost primal that I can't say no. I don't want to. It's scary and exhilarating. More so when Lore retreats, working swiftly to remove his pants that pull around his ankles. My throat runs dry upon seeing his arousal. He's the type of beauty that can make anyone stare, make anyone

do what they never thought they would if only to be gifted this sight. I can't take my eyes off him.

Eager to return the favor, I guide Lore back onto the bed. He moans into our kiss when I grip his base. His cock throbs in appreciation, hips already thrusting into my hand. Moaning my name, he presses his forehead against mine. I never really had a distaste or likeness to my name, but when Lore's moaning it against my lips, I suddenly can't think of being named anything else. He groans low in the back of his throat when I lean down to move my lips over his arousal. I'm suddenly very grateful for having experience, for being able to please him. His fingers tear into my hair, gripping tight as I move my mouth around him.

I almost expect that frightened feeling to return, that I shouldn't be doing this, but there's nothing. Nothing other than the desire to please Lore like he did for me. To watch him come undone. To run my hands over his trembling thighs, taste him on my tongue, hear his soft moans, and rapid intakes of breath. He's terrible and beautiful all at once. Everything I've hated and yearned for. Too much to bear and never enough.

Lore trembles beneath me. His cheeks grow flushed with color, a rare blush that somehow makes him even more erotic. It's what I wanted, so much more than I dreamed. And when he calls my name one more time, I know he has reached his limit. His body shivers when his orgasm rocks him. I open my eyes to gaze up at him, watching as he comes undone by my mouth. I don't stop until Lore lays spent, motionless on the bed and breathing heavily. Seeing him like this almost feels against the rules. Panting, lust filled eyes, sex crazed hair, kiss marks littering his check where I add a few more just because. Lore leans into the touch, eyes still closed as he basks in the afterglow. Then I kiss him. His arms slip around my shoulders, pulling our naked bodies together until I don't know where one of us ends and the other begins.

It's strange how right this feels, like this is the way we're meant to be. Smiling stupidly at one another between our kissing. Then the lazy cuddling beneath the sheets afterwards where Lore rests his head on my chest and it's okay. Everything's okay. It's so exceedingly ordinary in the most

extraordinary way that my mind lays silent as if it, too, wants to listen to my heart for once and enjoy the moment.

Lore's warm. I catch his long hair between my fingers. As expected, the strands are as soft as silk. Maybe even more so. I wrap the hair around my fingers, then brush some away from his face. His own fingers run over my stomach, discovering scars and the four birthmarks cluttered by my hip.

"They look like constellations," he says, connecting the marks with his fingers. I try to focus on that. On him. His slow breaths, the feeling of his skin on mine, the occasional tender touch of his lips against my chest, but then it returns; the fear so engraved into me that I can't even enjoy this for what it is.

The comfort of earlier has already started to dissipate. Nerves settle in my gut once more. When I blink, I swear I see the Prophet standing at the altar in Trinia cathedral. She spreads her arms wide as she preaches the Holy Mother's Doctrine; *Vampires were sent to earth by the Dark Lord Elminore to test our faith, to drive us away from the Holy Mother's light. When we listened to their lies, they showed their true colors and betrayed us. You mustn't ever forget that.* I see myself sitting among the crowd, sweating as if I know my future. The future where I've been with a dhampir.

I try to calm myself. Try to keep myself in the moment because I want to. I want to be here. I want my brain to shut up for five fucking minutes, please.

"What constellation would they be?" I ask, gripping Lore's shoulder in hopes that his warmth will ease me.

"Oh, that's easy." He passes me a knowing glance. "The Seren Constellation for all those who overthink everything."

"That sounds accurate."

"Are you doing that now? Overthinking."

I get the feeling he already has the answer.

Pushing up onto his elbow, Lore leans in for a kiss and another. His hair tickles my cheeks. Then he hovers above me, pressing a hand against my chest, over my heart that he no doubt feels racing. I wish it wouldn't. In all earnest, I *truly* wish it wouldn't. I wish to tell him that, but the words rest on the tip of my tongue. My mind's spiraling, as if carried into a riptide that swirls me about so brutally that I haven't the energy to utter a word.

His hand starts to feel heavy. A boulder atop my chest, crushing the air out of my lungs. I gently push his touch aside to sit up with my back to him. The air chills my skin once heated by Lore's proximity. My hands grip the edge of the bed, knuckles bone white.

I knew before we stepped into this room that I'd feel like this afterwards. That my mind would roar with memories of a frightened child seated in a pew, surrounded by peers who, if they knew what I've done now, would condemn me. And I don't know what I'd say or do; would I kneel and beg for forgiveness or stand tall and admit the truth?

"This is nothing to beat yourself up about," Lore says, garnering my raised brow that morphs into a scowl at his teasing grin. "This was an inevitable turn of events. I am very attractive. It's no wonder you fell for my many charms."

That's so like him to say, to turn a pivotal moment into a trivial one. He leans against the headboard acting as if we've exchanged handshakes and nothing more. I don't know if I'm irritated or impressed.

I step out of bed, very aware of Lore's eyes on me as I redress, although I hesitate upon buttoning my shirt. Once more, I peer down at myself; an unrecognizable man in a suit bought by a dhampir rather than the robes I've always known. I hear movement on the bed. Looking back, Lore has gotten up as well. My eyes glance south, admiring what might not have been seen during the moment, until he's covered by his own trousers. He's working on his shirt when I fully face him, ruffling my hair.

"How doesn't anything phase you?" I ask. "What we did--"

"Was perfectly natural."

"Natural between people who can be something but we're--" I gesture frantically between us. Lore rests a hand on his hip, head tilted in questioning. "We're sworn enemies. I'm a paladin of the Holy Church, a church that openly condemns your very existence; do you really think we belong together?"

Lore's eyes grow stern when he hisses his words through clenched teeth, "Are you forgetting to whom you speak? I'm a dhampir. Ask any vampire or mortal, we don't *belong* anywhere." He tugs on his jacket, muttering the last few words as if he isn't aware of it himself. "We're just the ones you all fuck in secrecy."

Based on the slight widening of his eyes, I don't think he meant to say that.

"Lore--"

"Stop thinking about the church," he interjects, deeming what he said less important, or desperate to run away from his own admittance. I know the feeling. And I know that cold look that freezes me in place. "Stop letting them dictate your every thought. They aren't always right. Question them, always."

"I don't know if I can face the answers. I don't know if I can face what little is left of me when all I've ever known is thrown away," I whisper, unsure of what to do when Lore walks around the bed. Do I put distance between us? Do I let him any closer? My body shivers, remembering his heated touch. Then he rests his hands on my neck, cradling me like a delicate piece of glass.

"That's not true," he says softly. "There will be only you afterwards. Not Seren, Paladin of the Holy Church, but you."

"What if the real me isn't much better?"

"You are so much more, Seren. I needn't ask about your past to know you've always been a good man, regardless of what the church did to you and made you believe. The true Seren is in here. You only need to let him out. Let him thrive and see where he takes you."

I don't need to see where he'd take me. I know he'd still take me to you.

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***sips tea* Well, well, well, our pent up boys have finally done something. And they've talked. Seren seems to be having quite a few admissions, even if they are not out loud. Is this the first of many rendezvous or is this a one and done? Can Seren handle what has happened? We love the tension, the drama, the romance!**

Also, if you're unaware I have a story on tapas called The Matchmaker Prince. It's an adorable romantic comedy about an author who falls in love with the fairytale prince he created when the prince comes to life. It's a very sweet and funny love story available on tapas. Season one completed this weekend so there's 78 episodes to binge if you're interested on checking it out. I left an external link or you can go to tapas.io search for The Matchmaker Prince and give it a try!

67. The Chaperones

Draven knocking on our door to inform us about lunch is the reason Lore and I don't continue our discussion. I sit among them wordlessly. My food's pushed about my plate, seeing as I don't have an appetite. A brief occasional glance from Cyan tells me that I should at least try to eat so I force a few bites of food down. It's as if my thoughts are blocking the rest of my body from properly functioning.

"We're just the ones you all fuck in secrecy," Lore had said. I couldn't deny that, seeing as that's exactly what happened. A hypocritical paladin secretly meets up with a dhampir lord. Now that is a scandal, one that I'm surprised hasn't already made the papers.

I don't know what happens now, what's expected of me and what I expect of myself. I don't know who Seren is, who... Seren Farshine is. When was the last time I even thought of my last name? When was the last time I ever spoke it? I try to recall a memory, but the last was decades ago, long before I became a paladin. I never thought about how the church strips that away; our name. They leave part of it to let us feel like we're still us, but that last name, the one that belongs to our real family; the church steals it. We don't even realize it. I never realized it.

A hand grasps my shoulder. "Seren, we're going up to the viewing bay," Lore says. Draven and Cyan are already walking away.

"Are we almost there?" I ask, stumbling out of my chair. The mere touch of Lore's hand makes my body shiver. Looking into his eyes, I remember earlier, the desire.

"We thought you may want to get a glimpse of the capital," he says. Even his voice makes my heart race.

I shake my head to disperse such thoughts. We head towards the viewing bay. I'm a little surprised he isn't trying to speak to me. Maybe he's letting

me think or maybe he needs time to think. Although any thoughts concerning us disappear when we reach the domed room that allows everyone to look out towards Zulia, the capital.

We're immediately shown the difference between our technological advances. The city stands tall and stretches far across the plane, and yet, it does not take away from the beauty of nature. Trees twist among smooth white surfaces of the skyscrapers. Vines and flowers dangle from balconies, moving like rivers or even stretching from one building to the next to almost create a natural bridge. If anyone were brave enough to try it. Flowers hang out of every window, casting the city of white towers in brilliant color. Though that color is slightly off from Earth, all having the faintest hint of red from the light red sun hanging overhead.

Zulia doesn't reek of smoke. The skies are clear as crystal waters. Even from here, I can see the streets below interwoven among the trees. The paths curve so frequently it's clear that most structures were made to sit around nature rather than destroying it to make room.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Lore asks, admiring the clean horizon.

"Yes, it's quite beau--" the word doesn't quite leave my mouth when my gaze lands upon the looming figures standing upon the airship dock ahead of us; Warlords. Giant mechanical suits as tall as a townhouse, technological marvels used by vampires to combat seraphics. They patrol atop the building with a few smaller versions standing inside, their users likely gazing down upon others from their cockpits. The tinted shields across the head of the machine prevent anyone from seeing within.

The captain announces our arrival that was so smooth I hadn't even realized we docked. The rest is a bit of a blur. Everyone moves to grab their belongings. Crowds head for the doors. My eyes squint at the red tinted light outside. It grows closer as we walk among the crowd towards the exit.

"Our ever so sweet chaperones will be outside waiting for us," Lore explains with his hand resting against the small of my back. "Remember to be on your best behavior."

"Only if they're also on theirs," I mumble, making Lore chuckle. My chest warms at the sound.

At the exit, five vampires wait dressed in deep navy garbs trimmed in silver. Their golden eyes shimmer brightly even beneath the red tinted sun. The vampire at the front wears a charming smile that doesn't quite reach her doe-like orange eyes. Stepping closer, I notice that their suits all have an emblem on the left side of their chest, although the woman at the front differs. Vampires have a similar system among their aristocracy so I can only assume the woman is of an important family while the others are our guards.

"Lord Seymour," she calls with a faint tip of her head. "Welcome to Zulia."

"Thank you, Seraphine. It's good to be back," Lore replies. He steps toward them. I remain a step behind, observing the guards. All their eyes are trained on me, as if the others don't exist. "I trust that everything has been arranged for my visit."

"Of course." Seraphine gestures at the vampires behind her. "I am here to remind the paladin that he is expected to keep his magic to himself. That axe of his must be taken to your residence and remain there during your visit. Should any problems arise, the guards will handle it."

Even if those problems are caused by them? Because something tells me they're more likely to start trouble than anyone else.

"Seren is aware of all expectations," Lore says around a charming smile. "Inform His Majesty that there's nothing to worry about."

Seraphine's smile looks like lies. "We'll see about that." She reaches into her pocket to pull out two shimmering green badges. "Make sure the humans wear these when in public at all times."

Lore takes the badges to hand to me and Cyan. With that, Seraphine flicks her wrist and the guards surround us as if to form a shield. I clutch my luggage. Their stares are suffocating, as are their mumbled words as we

push through the crowds of the airship station. I hear them speak to one another from time to time.

"I've never seen one out of their currish church garbs. Suppose he's frightened that would have riled us up?"

"If this is meant to be one of their fearful paladins, I don't see why His Majesty doesn't take the fight back to them."

"He must actually be Lord Seymour's pet. Something to play with at night."

I cast a glare at one of the men, who openly snarls, "Do you have something to say, blood bag?"

I freeze at the name I only heard thrown about in books. Vampires on earth rarely use the term, likely because they are heavily outnumbered. However, on Vexsis, as I gaze about the station to find one vampire after the other watching me and Cyan, I realize that is how they see us. Blood in our veins for them to take.

"He's feeling a little irritable after our long journey. Vexsis can be very disorienting for first timers," Lore interjects. He rests a firm hand on my shoulder and squeezes. His way to tell me to keep myself in check. I don't have a voice here.

The vampire sticks up his nose. We continue our journey out of the station to the clean streets beyond. They're nothing like earth, devoid of trash, dirt, and smog. Warlords prowl the area here too. One stands along the road where a sleek, dome shaped vehicle waits. The doors open without Lore having to grasp a handle. Draven takes our bags to sit in the trunk of the second vehicle, along with my axe that I hesitate to hand over, then heads to the car behind us to ride with Cyan. I sit next to Lore in our own car, admiring the cylindrical apparatus. The seats are a deep blue and soft as a bed. In the front, the guards drive using knobs and dials.

Lore moves a bit, causing his thigh to brush against mine. My body stiffens. I glance at Lore, admiring his slim neck where I realize the marks I left are already gone. Damn dhampir healing up too fast--not that I wanted the

marks to be there for everyone to see. And now I'm becoming paranoid. Has anyone seen any marks on me?

"I would like to head for my factory first," Lore states rather than asks. He smiles at the vampire who hesitates, like he wants to talk back, like he wants to tell a dhampir to know his place.

But the guard forces a smile and asks, "Do you not wish to head for your residence first? You said you've had a long journey."

"My butler will head there first. I wish to get this job done swiftly, as I imagine His Majesty does too."

That seems to get the guard moving. He pushes a few more knobs, then the car moves. He sits back without touching anything on the dash. I grip the door, fearful of a crash, but we move smoothly.

"He isn't driving," I whisper at Lore. The vampires still hear me, both smirking smuggly. "Will we not crash?"

"Cars in Vexsis drive on their own. There are no vehicular accidents here," Lore explains. "There's a powerline in the road that guides them. You put in your destination and go."

I bite the inside of my cheeks to prevent my jaw from dropping. The guards will likely find even more humor in that. No doubt they're thinking about how "primitive" mortals are. They never shared all the truths concerning their technology, clearly, and they hold that above our heads. We have divinity though, something they don't. I suppose that evens things out, in a sense.

"You never told me what was really going on at your factory," I whisper, although it's useless. The vampires will hear me regardless. I could change that, if I were allowed to use my divinity.

"There have been a few robberies," Lore answers.

"Can't the local authorities handle that? Why travel all the way here?"

Lore smiles. His gaze shifts to the front seat where the guards are definitely listening. "I like to show my face from time to time, as a reminder to local authorities that they should do their absolute best to protect the interests of my factory."

In other words, he showed up to make sure they don't slack. The guards may not say it, but you can see the truth in their eyes; they hate Lore too. Not as much as they hate me, but a dhampir bossing them around doesn't appear to sit well with them. Maybe that makes up for the babysitting. At least I'll have a good time knowing Lore can kick them around a bit.

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Since I have a lot of new readers, I want to talk about something. Last chapter was a mature scene and while the comments were relatively fine, there were some that made me very uncomfortable. Those of you who are new; I am sex-repulsed. Writing mature scenes is incredibly difficult for me. This is made worse when I worry about the reactions readers will have and how they share *far too much* with me. I cannot avoid comments so please, please, please do not talk about your boner, masturbating, or how turned on you are etc. I really do not want to know, even if they're "jokes." I want to include mature scenes because it adds to Lore and Seren's development, however, comments such as those make my repulsion worse. It will result in me feeling terrible and being incapable of writing mature scenes. Again, last chapter wasn't too bad, but I noticed new readers who said some things that I've since deleted. And as a future note, please remember everyone isn't sex-positive, some may have their own reasons that makes mature scenes and discussions difficult.

Anyway, our boys have made it to Vexsis, but Seren, as expected, isn't welcome among the vampires. What do you think about the difference in technology? Will things go according to plan in Vexsis or is trouble gonna find them?

68. Making Plans with Draven

Cyan P.O.V.

The gruesome twosome glare at me for daring to invade their personal space, but I don't really give a damn. If we're going to have chaperones on this trip, I won't let them get in the way of my investigations. In this case, I'm investigating the car that moves on its own.

"What does this button do?!" I ask, pointing at a yellow button on the dashboard.

When I try to press the button, the vampire guard hisses. "Don't touch anything, blood bag!"

"Then tell me what the button does, ass muncher!"

The guard curls his nose.

"I'm implying that your breath smells like shit," I explain around a coy smile that has Draven gripping the collar of my shirt to yank me into the backseat. "Hey!" I huff, glaring at the buzzkill beside me. "I was busy up there."

"What he means to say is he's very sorry for being a bother," Draven says with a firm stare that has our duo of toenail gobblers easing off their glares. For now. I will ensure they get annoyed with me later.

"Can you behave yourself for five seconds?" Draven whispers. His warm breath tickles my ear. My shoulders hunch up. I veer away from him.

"This is me behaving. If I were my usual self, I'd have torn this car apart already."

Draven opens his mouth, then closes it because he knows I'm telling the truth. Then our car comes to a stop. Sighing, Draven steps out. He keeps the

door open for me. We're parked on a wide street filled with tall townhouses and small but beautiful gardens. Stone walls separate the homes and iron gates from the sidewalk, giving privacy even in a rather cramped setting. Though the house pales compared to Seymour Manor, its grandeur isn't missed. A frosted gate keeps the front of the home private, but above the walls I make out the intricate carvings of white stone.

Draven gently tugs on my shirt. He hands me my luggage then opens the front gate with a silver key. The guards follow across the stone pathway through a lush garden of purple and blue flowers. Stained glass windows make up the front door, casting a rainbow of color across the walkway. Using a red key, Draven opens the door into a brightly lit navy foyer. The guards do not follow. They scowl at the front door, arms crossed, then I slam the door in their face.

Draven frowns.

"What?" I shrug. "Their faces annoyed me."

He rolls his eyes just as a vampire maid comes shuffling out of another room.

"Sir Morrow, welcome!" She says, smiling. "Everything has been made up just as Lord Seymour likes it."

"Good. We'll be taking our belongings to our rooms then," Draven says, although he retrieves a notebook from his pocket. I raise a curious brow when he scribbles something on the note to show to the maid. She takes the notebook to write a response. When I try to speak, Draven holds up a hand, and speaks to the maid. "His Grace and the paladin I spoke about to you earlier are on their way to the factory. I plan to go over a few things here to ensure His Grace is happy and comfortable when he arrives. Cyan will join me."

The maid gives a brief curtsy. "If you need anything, let me know." Then she shuffles away.

"What was--" Draven raises the notebook to cut me off. He's writing something else, then hands it to me so I may read the conversation.

Did anyone peculiar arrive before us?

Yes, three days ago, a technician was sent to investigate our security system as protocol.

Cyan, we will check for cameras or wire taps. Discreetly.

I don't like how he underlines discreetly. After returning the notebook, we head our separate ways to investigate opposing sides of the townhouse. While I don't discover any cameras, I do find a wiretap in Lore's office and the dining room. When Draven and I meet back in the library, we go over what we found.

"So there are no cameras anywhere in the house, but there are four wire taps; one in His Grace's office, one in the dining room, one in Seren's room, and one in His Grace's," Draven says.

"I'm a little insulted that our rooms weren't tapped."

Draven ignores me. "This is tamer than expected."

"You were expecting them to spy on us?"

"Obviously."

"Obviously," I mock. "Why would they leave wiretaps? Wouldn't they expect us to search for them?"

"Because Morren Valyork is paranoid beyond the path of logical reasoning."

"Sorry, I don't keep up on my crazy vampirical overlords. Care to explain?"

"Valyork was king during The Vampire Wars. His power before that was unquestionable, but after what the vampires perceive as a loss against earth, his power dwindles more and more each decade. So does his sanity."

"Have you met him?" I ask. "Sounds like you're speaking from experience."

"Unfortunately, I am, but everyone hears the gossip."

"What are we going to do about the wiretaps? Should we remove them now?"

Draven shakes his head. "We should wait until His Grace returns. He may want to keep them just to avoid Valyork trying to intervene in other ways."

"That's a load of shit. We just have to accept that they're listening in? Can't we inform earth or something?

"No. We're in Vexsis. It's their rules and His Grace is not respected here either," Draven says with a snarl. "Even if we were to make a fuss, no one would care about what a dhampir has to say."

That has me shuffling my feet in agitation. They're fools for not respecting Lore. And they're fools for always underestimating him.

A loud rushing sound from outside catches my attention. I hurry to the window, barely catching a glimpse of the backend of a ship. Smaller than the airship we traveled on, so it couldn't have been one of those, which means--

"Was that an Aerial Warlord?!" I ask, glancing at Draven, who has come to stand beside me.

"I think so."

"I heard they can sail through the sky faster than any airship and rain hellfire on the ground from above!"

"Yeah, they can, although I don't see how that's something to be excited about."

"Because you lack innovation," I huff while pressing my face to the glass as if that'll bring the Warlord back. "We are nowhere near that kind of

technology on earth. This is a goldmine of knowledge waiting for me to pick through with a fine tooth comb."

"Which will not happen because our chaperones would sooner slaughter you."

I can't deny that. Vampires have never been forthcoming about their technology, which is understandable given our tense relationship.

"Do you think His Grace would let me explore some of the city? I'd love to see it. We're so limited here, hidden behind walls. It'd be a shame not to explore!" I look at Draven with hope that's slightly scuffed out by his frown.

"Not everything in the city will be to your liking," he says a bit ominously.

"Meaning?"

"There are no free humans here, Cyan. They're slaves, if they're lucky. Walking meals, if they aren't. Many are not permitted within most buildings and must hide their faces because, should one so much as look at a vampire funny, there are no laws against them being killed in the street." Draven points at my chest, to the bright green badge. "That is the only thing preventing you from suffering the same fate so make sure to always be wearing it."

"Whoa, way to dampen the mood, gloomy gus," I grumble, not surprised to find Draven shaking his head in disbelief at me. "Were you expecting me to gasp in horror and disbelief?"

"I was expecting something other than a joke."

"I'm not an idiot, Draven. I know mortals and vampires hate each other. I actually expected something a bit worse, to be honest. Maybe public maiming or a festival where vampires sell the skin of humans like we do bear rugs."

Draven scowls in disgust, informing me that they do not have Skin Festivals. Good to know.

"Now that you've failed at frightening me, answer my question. Will His Grace let me go out for a bit?" I offer up a hopeful grin.

"Perhaps. You cannot go alone though, remember? His Grace will be busy so we'll have to go together."

Together... Draven and I in Vexsis, in Zulia, which Draven mentioned once as being his hometown. Ah!

"I guess that'd be okay since you're from here. You probably know some good places to visit, yeah?" My heart palpitates at the thought. If we go together then it'd be like... like a...

"It has been a long time since I've traveled the city for pleasure," he replies, glancing out the window as if he can see past the walls to the streets beyond. "If any of the places I know of remain, we can pay them a visit."

"Great!" I chirp, shivering under Draven's amused orange gaze. His lips pull back into a teasing smirk that I shake off. "Well, that's honestly the least you can do. This is your home turf so you should be the guide."

"Of course." Draven steps away from the window. I watch him walk to the door where he waits in the entry. "We should put our belongings away before His Grace gets back."

"Right, yeah." I push away from the window to walk out of the library. My fingertips tingle. My toes curl.

If His Grace says yes, Draven and I can go into town together. He'll take me to places he went to as a kid. I hardly know anything about Draven's past, although I can't complain. He doesn't know much about mine either. I might learn more soon though when we go on... on the definitely not a date even if kind of totally feels like a date.

Fuck. It is a date. I basically asked Draven on a date!

Draven's worried about Cyan's safety in Vexsis. Cyan's worried that he basically asked Draven on a date lol Is it a good idea for them to go out and about when mortals are seen as nothing more than walking meals?

69. Deserved It

Seren P.O.V.

The nellore factory is about an hour drive out of the city, although I do not know how far we went. These cars drive much faster. The capital can't be seen in the distance by the time we reach the factory. With technology from Vexsis, this looks less like a mining operation and more like a mechanical manufacturing facility. I follow Lore around like a lost puppy, befuddled by the world around me. We spend the day there conducting interviews--well, Lore interviews and I sipped on some tea and ate cookies--before heading back to the capital around dusk.

"How long do you suppose it will take to discover who has been robbing you?" I ask on the car ride back. I'm not sure if Lore will answer with our guards listening in.

"I'm hoping for no more than a week," he replies. "But we'll see."

The remainder of the ride is silent, although the harsh glares from the vampires certainly say more than they let on. I'm relieved to reach Lore's residence in an upscale neighborhood of townhouses. Two guards already wait past the front gates, but outside the doors, when we arrive. The ones we met back at the station. I imagine they'll be switched out in the evenings. They sneer at me when I walk by, and I might shut the door harder behind me because of that. Lore offers a grin over his shoulder.

"Your Grace," Draven calls, having already appeared at the top of the stairs. Does he have a freaky sixth sense to tell when Lore arrives? Maybe he was listening for footsteps all this time or he has a terrible trait that makes footsteps very loud, although I doubt it considering his orange eyes.

"Draven, I trust that you and Cyan got here without incident," Lore says, searching the stairs for Cyan, who appears a few moments later on our

right. White powder circles his mouth. He takes another bite of the doughnut in his grasp.

"The guards were annoying, but not any trouble," Cyan explains, making sure to keep himself slightly hidden from Draven.

I bite back a smirk. Doesn't want his crush to see him messily eating? That's a little cute.

"Was there any trouble here?" Lore asks.

Draven descends the stairs while speaking of the wiretaps and where they were discovered. I heard Morren Valyork was paranoid, but to wiretap the home of an aristocrat from earth who would certainly discover it, that's entirely unexpected. Lore doesn't appear to mind and assures me that this won't be a problem. It's better than last time, which apparently was full blown cameras.

"Remove them, Draven. If Valyork wishes to start something, he'll find a way to do so by whatever means necessary. At least this way we have some privacy." Lore leans towards me to whisper, "Which means you may join me in my room without worry whenever you wish."

"And this is my cue to leave," I say, shoving my palm against Lore's chin to push him back. His childish chuckle fades as I explore the estate. Lore shouts something about dinner soon, but I'm not that hungry. In fact, my stomach is a tad upset. Another problem Lore said might arise in Vexsis.

The townhouse pales compared to Seymour estate, although that doesn't mean it isn't as high class as high class can be. The bottom floor consists of group areas such as the kitchen, dining room, office, and lounge; each one as glorious as the last. I was thinking maybe there'd be more here about Lore, particularly the Seymour family, but that's a silly thought. I don't even think the Seymour's ever came to Vexsis.

Our rooms are upstairs, along with another lounge. I try not to think of the wiretap when I step into my room. Draven will remove it later. The room's smaller than the one at the Seymour estate, but equally as charming. Lore's

room is next door. I peek inside, wondering again if there's something to tell me more about him. His room isn't much different than my own, clearly a place he merely rests in then leaves. I pretend not to be disappointed when shutting the door.

I return downstairs to inspect the library. A set of glass doors lead to a lush backyard overwhelmed by blooming wildflowers and vines that circle up a marbled fountain statue. Books line the shelves. Has he really read all of these or are they only for show?

Pulling out a few, I flush when I open one of the books to immediately land on a rather steamy romance scene. Yeah, Lore probably has read this one. I quickly put the book back and hope he can't somehow sense that I grabbed it. Or know that it immediately made me think of us, how I want to do more.

Swallowing hard, I step away from the books to admire a staircase leading to a second floor. Stained glass windows decorate the spiral staircase. I follow the iron railing up the tower to a small sitting area in a tower that overlooks the quiet neighborhood. It's beautiful, albeit strange to see sparkling streets and a clear sky. The world is quiet, devoid of clanking gears and sparking lamp posts struggling to stay lit in the evening. In Vexsis, everything works smoothly, better than any machine ever could.

I don't know when I fall back onto the loveseat in the tower, but I'm admiring the view when Lore appears. He wears his famous impish grin.

"Dinner is almost ready," he declares, ascending the final step. "Will you dine with us or are you having too much fun snooping around my home for the Holy Church?"

"I wasn't snooping. Not for the church," I admit too swiftly.

"Oh?" Lore falls onto the loveseat beside me. I stiffen when he maneuvers to sit with his back against the arm rest. His long legs stretch to rest over my thighs. I should push him away, but I don't.

"So you were snooping for something other than the church?" he adds.

My hand rests on his thigh. I don't know why. Because he's close. Because he's warm. Because I crave this attention. Being like this, together on a loveseat alone in a beautiful room, this feels right. Okay. Great, actually.

"I guess I..." My breath hitches, having been caught in the storm of Lore's brilliant blue eyes. "I was looking for more about you."

"If you're truly so interested, you should try asking me."

"I've tried that."

"When you were snooping for the church, but if you--" He leans forward to press his hand against my chest. It makes me think of before, our time on the airship; Lore's heavy breaths, the scent of his sweat, his flushed cheeks, lustful eyes, and the touch of his skin. "If you wish to know about me, all you need to do is ask."

Lore retreats, a welcome reprieve for my sanity. He holds up his hands as he shrugs, "Although I cannot guarantee I will always be truthful. Having a bit of mystery is sexy."

"If you say so," I laugh, aware that my hand continues to rest on Lore's thigh that's as relaxed as I am. I gaze out the window, staring at the clouds that have a fascinating purple-ish tint. "I didn't think I'd find Vexsis to be so breathtaking."

Lore hums. "I don't think anyone from earth ever does. You've always been told of the horrors and expect the planet to mirror as such."

"It's beautiful. Haven't you ever considered living here?"

Lore presses an offended hand over his chest. "Oh, are you now wishing for me to be gone? So far that I'm on another planet?"

"Don't tease. You know that isn't what I meant."

He chuckles, then sighs. "I never considered relocating. I wouldn't be treated any better here. If anything, the treatment may be worse as my Lordship wouldn't be as *respected* as it is on earth."

Translation: no one would give a shit, compared to earth where they kind of have to give a shit. Not much, but a little.

"How respected is it on earth?" I ask. "I always heard nobility liked to throw extravagant parties for no reason other than they were bored and everyone who was anyone was invited."

"I'm always at least invited," he replies, rolling his eyes dramatically. "But that is purely for show. No one wishes for me to attend so I only go if I must. Those parties are drab anyway, although--" He leans forward again. I'm taken aback by his close proximity, how I feel the warmth radiating off his skin. "If you wish to attend one alongside me, I would go."

"And why would I want to go, especially with you?" I don't know if I sound teasing when I'm so breathless and my eyes refuse to stray from Lore's lips.

"Because I'm not a bore, and as much as you want to play the stubborn paladin who can do no wrong, I know there's a little daredevil in you who wants to have a freakishly good time."

With you, I think I really do.

That thought, along with everything happening between us, drives me to kiss him again. As exhilarating as the first. The touch of his lips sends scorching wildfire through my veins. Something within me has been empty for so long that I never noticed the vacancy until now--until I've slowly started to rip the church from my veins. Now that they're leaving, I'm realizing what I really want. No, I'm admitting to what I really want.

Lore, he consumes my thoughts. I don't want to just kiss him. I don't want to just hold him. I want to know him. I want to know Lore Seymour and all of his secrets and everything he has ever wanted and I want to give him everything he has ever wanted. He's truly driving me wild. But I know if I ask, this moment will be ruined. Lore's secrets are secrets for a reason. If I were to ask about his past, specifically about the Seymour family and how they treated him, I seriously doubt he'd want to answer. And I don't want to pry, but I want to know.

When we break apart, Lore has somehow moved into my lap. His feet now touch the floor, body in my arms as he shifts towards me. His lips descend to my neck. I shiver as his lips press against my pulse. His hair's soft. He really does smell sweet. He tastes sweet too. Kissing me again as I hold him tightly. Then he rests his forehead against mine. We breathe heavily, eyes half mast.

"You look like you have more questions," he says, grinning seductively. "Although, I think I will start charging you for answers."

"What will that charge be?" I ask, hoping for that good time Lore promised.

"Everytime I answer you have to take a piece of your clothes off."

Fuck, I should take this chance to ask dumb questions that won't ruin the mood. Lore's even running his hand down my chest, growing closer to closer to a part of me that already knows his touch and therefore yearns for it even more. His eyes say what they want; me. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't want him too.

"Uh, the, um, the questions I have aren't exactly, uh--" how the fuck am I meant to think when Lore's kissing my neck? "Appropriate for this situation?"

"Is that so?" He hums, sounding disappointed. That's fine. I'm disappointed too. Kind of wish my head would listen to the head between my legs in this instance. Lore leans away, making me almost shout some dumb questions just to get his hand in my pants, but then he speaks, "Fine, I will answer your not appropriate for this situation questions, however, after these you will be expected to remove your clothes if I answer any personal related questions."

"What if I ask these personal questions in public? Do I have to undress in front of everyone?"

"No, this is for my private viewing."

"And if you ask me personal questions, will you also follow these rules?"

Dare I say it, Lore looks impressed that I had the guts to ask. I'm somewhat impressed too. It's not like I can't make my desires known, it's just that... with Lore, the situation has always been complicated. Day by day though, it feels less complicated.

"Okay," he says, eagerly smiling. "These same rules apply to me as well, so what do you want to know?"

I want to know a few things and each one makes me hesitate. With Lore so relaxed in my arms, I don't want to change that. I wait a moment, watching him eventually tilt his head in silent questioning.

"About the Seymour family--" his expression hardens instantly. "How did they treat you?"

"How do you think?" He's using an unsettling tone, one that shows he wants to distance himself from me. I grip him a little tighter as if to say I won't let him, at least not physically.

"I'm not asking to tell the church. I promise I won't tell them. I just... I have read the files," I explain, searching Lore's gaze for a sign of irritation or anger. He shows neither. He doesn't show much of anything. "To me, their deaths sounded like unfortunate, albeit strange, accidents, but there's never a mention of what your life was like with them. Nothing to say if you were well taken care of or not."

I'm not surprised that Lore stands up. My arms fall to my side, feeling cold. He faces the window, his back to me.

"You don't have to tell me," I add. "It's a very personal question."

"You've shared very personal information with me," he replies, now leaning against the window. His knuckles grasp the ledge until they're white as bone. I don't know how much time passes before he speaks, "I was ten when Monroe Seymour came to the orphanage searching for a charity case. Who better to adopt than a loathed dhampir born of rape at that? Dhampir make for excellent workers. In exchange, we're given room and board and an education. I will admit that I had more than most; clothes that fit, a roof

over my head, food in my belly, and the best education money could buy, but they were vile, all of them. I was an educated slave, nothing more, and they made sure I never forgot that."

Lore faces me. The dim blue light of the sun illuminates his towering silhouette, darkening his expression so that his vibrant blue eyes shimmer like deep ocean waves. "I despised them. They taught me everything I should never have had to know. And yes, I am glad that they all got exactly what they *deserved* ."

There's a twist to Lore's lips, almost menacing, almost frightening, almost terrifying.

"Your Grace?" Draven calls from the bottom of the stairs.

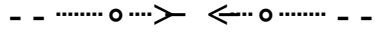
The frightening expression dissipates, replaced with a cordial smile. "Yes, Draven?"

"Dinner is prepared. I'm searching for Seren--"

"He is up here with me. We're coming down now." Lore looks at me, wearing that same smile. "Do you have more questions?"

"No," I reply, half lying. I feel like I have more questions now. Something about the way Lore looked, how he said it, makes me wonder again; *did he have something to do with the deaths of the Seymour family?*

But as Lore walks away, as I watch his stiff shoulders disappear down the stairs, I also ask myself; *even if he did, what if they did deserve it?*



Hello, hello friends! If you are unaware, season two of my story The Matchmaker Prince available on tapas has started this week. There's 82 episodes to binge of an adorable romantic comedy about an author desperate for a boyfriend, who accidentally brings the prince he created to life and, well, one thing leads to another ;)

These two can't keep their hands off each other anymore lol But Seren has managed to ask some personal questions. We now know that the Seymour family did not treat Lore well. He hates them. Does this point to him having something to do with their deaths? If Seren learns that it's true, will he remain on Lore's side?

70. Between Us

I don't sleep well that night. What happened with Lore yesterday, what he said about the Seymour family, being in Vexsis, knowing there are guards outside who wish to kill me, it leads to a restless night where I get up long before Lore's perfectionist butler can awaken me.

Yawning, I step out of bed and surprise myself by dressing in a suit without even thinking about it. My robes still lay in my suitcase. When I run my fingers over the fabric, they feel foreign. I hesitate for a moment, unsure of how to process the conflicting emotions. Then I shut the case and head downstairs.

"There was a murder last night," I hear from outside the front door. I remain in place, holding my breath to listen in on the guards. "Apparently, Lady Roxanne Sarron was found dead early this morning. No mention on how she died though."

Lady? She has a title. A high ranking official of Vexsis...

" The first pattern is that these murders are all against the elite and powerful; those of high status in the aristocracy and the church," that's what Olere said to me when he first showed me the paperwork on a potential serial killer. Now there's a death of an aristocrat within Vexsis when Lore happens to be here. Am I paranoid to find it strange?

"I met that bitch before," says another guard. "A foul, cruel, and unforgiving woman who spat at anyone she deemed beneath her, which was everyone save the noble family themselves. I bet she got herself murdered by one of her very many angry ex-husbands or she ran her mouth to the wrong person for the--"

They go silent. I watch the door for movement.

"Snooping, blood bag?" One of them asks while slamming their hand against the door. "You're lucky your little dhampir master keeps you safe or

we'd have drained you by now."

"I'd relieve the head from your shoulders before you had a chance to draw a weapon," I growl, somehow feeling more confident in a battle here. There are no mortal civilians I could potentially hurt by not holding back. If I wished to cast, I could cast any spell and wipe them off the map. Maybe I don't really need my axe. I've got all the divinity I could ever need that I can use to my heart's content.

The two of them laugh as if I've told the best joke. Before they can utter another word, I stomp towards the dining room, hoping breakfast is about ready. There's no food waiting for me, but Lore is. He sits at the head of the table in another accursed robe. Now, it's far worse because I know exactly what's beneath it and how badly I want another taste.

"Seren," he calls, making my name sound like the sweetest lullaby. "You're up early. Did you have trouble sleeping?"

"Yeah." I clear my throat and take a seat beside him. I try not to gaze at him out of my peripheral vision, but I continuously catch brief glances of his bare chest. "I'm not used to the room yet."

My attention drifts to the dining room entrance. A few steps around the bend is the foyer where I overheard the vampires. I look at Lore, who takes a drink of steaming coffee. He sets that coffee aside when I ask, "Did you hear about the death of Lady Roxanne Sarron?"

"Death?" he echoes, donning an expression of surprise that seems genuine, although that surprise may be due to me asking. "How do you know of Lady Sarron? Where did you hear this?"

"I overheard our friendly chaperones speaking outside. Apparently, she was found dead in her home this morning."

"Well, I can't say that's surprising." He clicks his tongue. "Lady Sarron was a complicated woman, despised by most and loved by fools."

"Fools?"

"She had a way with words and stole hearts so she could steal money."

"Is this what you heard about her or have you met her?" I ask, feeling a sense of dread wash over me. It's as if I've become the spy for the church again, trying to decipher whether Lore had to do with her death. Is it so odd that this happened? There must be as many murders in Vexsis as there is on earth.

"I knew her," he replies, not sounding pleased by the admission. "A truly repulsive person. Her last husband had children that she did not take kindly to, or so it seemed. I happened across her lecturing them to tears at a party during my last visit. If you ask me, she got what she deserved."

What she deserved --that's what he said about the Seymour family too, and with those same shadows to his eyes. I'm on edge again, unsure of how I'm feeling. Even more so when Lore reaches out to take my hand. He rests our interlocked hands atop the table, leaning closer so that his dark hair drapes over his shoulder in voluptuous waves. My breath catches in my throat when his lips almost take mine.

"What are you doing?" I ask, barely managing to press my back against the seat in a poor attempt to escape his attention.

"I'm trying to get your attention back on me," he says, fluttering his eyelashes. "I rather not speak about Lady Sarron when there are far more important matters to discuss, like what's happening between us. Are you going to pretend like nothing happened? Like nothing's happening now?"

"Nothing is happening now," I counter, removing my hand from his grasp. I hate putting that frown on his face, but what else is there to do? What do I expect to happen by giving in to him? Especially now when my head is all over the place. We can't just gallivant into the sunset to live happily ever after--it's a laughable thought.

"And yesterday, I... got swept up by the moment," I lied so badly it made us both cringe.

"What will you say when you get swept up by the moment again? That it was a fluke? That maybe I've got you under a spell?" He asks while taking me by the chin, forcing our eyes to meet. I think again of yesterday, of how he held me like this too, how I do want to get swept away again.

"What do you want me to say, Lore? This... it's--"

"It's what we both want," he interjects and doesn't let me get another word in. His lips crash against mine, a desperate touch that leaves me woozy. He slips his tongue between my lips, reminding me of all that he can accomplish when his mouth isn't preoccupied by snark. We break apart for breath, then lean in for another. Breathy kisses that leave me yearning for so much more. He makes me feel like I'm standing on the edge of madness.

"I'm telling you, I saw a vamp walking a robo dog!" Cyan's boisterous voice echoes from the foyer.

I push away from Lore hard. He falls back into his chair that I hadn't realized he rose from. A playful glint sparkles in his eyes as he licks his bottom lip, which makes my heart palpitate even more.

"There are no robot dogs," Draven says as they enter the dining room. He shakes his head. "You were seeing things because you just got up."

"I wasn't!" Cyan argues. I've never been so grateful for his odd conversations. He saved me from whatever Lore had planned (although I'm sure I would have more than enjoyed his plans.)

"Your Grace!" Cyan shouts, slamming his hands on the table next to Lore. "There are robot dogs here, right?"

"No," he says, smiling as the excitement fades from Cyan's expression.

"But I saw--"

"You were tired and saw someone walking their dog that you somehow warped into a robot," Draven interrupts. He disappears into a backroom, probably to check on breakfast. Cyan drops into his seat, pouting childishly.

"I definitely saw a robot dog," he mutters under his breath.

I never thought I'd be grateful to hear about a potential robot dog.

Draven returns a moment later along with our breakfast. While the maid sets the table, Draven sits next to Cyan to ask, "Your Grace, Cyan was hoping that I could take him on a tour of the city. If you aren't in need of either of us at the mine, I thought we could do that today."

Cyan glares at my knowing smile. He squirms in his seat, gaze shifting nervously between Lore and Draven. I look towards Lore too and realize this could be an opportunity. He doesn't need me to go to the mine with him. All I did yesterday was sit around while he had a few meetings. I'd rather tour Vexsis than get lost in thought about him all day.

"I think it'd be great if the three--" I grunt when Lore suddenly kicks me in the shin.

Draven cocks a curious brow at me followed by Cyan looking at me like I've spat on his breakfast.

"I don't see a problem with it with the *two* of you going," Lore says with far too much emphasis on the word "two." Then he gestures towards Cyan's chest. "Make sure you wear that pin Seraphine gave us. It signals that you are a mortal from earth. The pins aren't actually a guarantee that nothing will happen to you so do not leave Draven's sight."

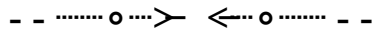
Cyan nods vigorously.

"And no attempting to tear anything apart. They'll charge me double, if not triple for the repairs."

Cyan pouts, reluctantly muttering, "Okay."

Lore's gaze shifts to me. He smirks over the rim of his cup.

Looks like we're stuck together today too.



Someone has died in Vexsis. Is this a strange coincidence or does Lore's appearance have to do with it? Feelings between our boys are getting more and more serious. Will Seren and Lore be able to have the relationship they desire?

71. Out on the Town

Cyan P.O.V.

Lore actually agreed to letting Draven and I tour the city. He allowed our Definitely-Not-A-Date to happen. Seren doesn't appear too pleased with that. He definitely tried to tag along when Lore put a stop to it, seemingly by kicking Seren under the table. At least, I heard a thud and that's all I can imagine that happened. To my sheer fucking surprise, I was a bit down that Seren couldn't tag along because now...

Now I sit by Draven in the back of the car on our way to city central repeating over and over again that this is not a date. We've gone on plenty of adventures together; scouting cities, tackling jobs, and going into town with the kids. This is no different. Except we aren't scouting for anything. This isn't a job. And the kids aren't here.

Who the fuck am I kidding? This was a stupid idea! Common sense has always been chasing me, but I've been outrunning it my whole life. I wish my legs would give out and let it catch up for once.

"Stop here," Draven orders. The guards reluctantly do so, always wearing a sour face. If they sucked on a lemon, they'd actually appear in a better mood.

Draven steps out of the car and I follow. We stand on a wide street leading to what I can only assume to be the very center of the capital. Even from here, I see an enormous fountain of shimmering water surrounded by overgrown willow trees. Strange how that's the center of the city.

"City Central should be right up your alley," Draven remarks, gesturing for me to follow him. "If it's as I remember, there are many pop-up shops with trinkets and souvenirs that you can tear apart to your heart's content."

"It is not trinkets and souvenirs I wish to tear apart." I pout. "Don't you have enough savings to purchase one of those fancy cars?"

"Even if I did, I wouldn't out of fear that I know you would destroy it."

"I'd learn how to put it back together." I grunt in surprise when Draven suddenly rests his hand on the small of my back. The touch is so gentle I barely feel it. He guides us so that I walk close to the buildings. He has done this on purpose, making sure that he is between me and the other vampires. I catch their stares; ones of confusion, annoyance, disgust, and hunger. Draven keeps a stern expression, almost daring anyone to come near.

"Did you come here often when you were a child?" I ask, trying not to pay attention to the mortals Draven warned me about. The ones following a few steps behind their masters, head bowed as if disgraced and faces covered in black veils. Their necks and wrists are horribly bruised and I can only imagine what other horrendous marks they have hidden.

"Yes, I lived with my father in our estate far from the city, but as you can guess with our vehicles it was very quick and easy to visit. I liked the pop-up stalls, seeing what new items they had for the day so my father often brought me here," Draven replies, puzzling me. My question stare has him tilting his head. "Why do you look at me like that?"

"You answered a pretty personal question without complaint. I'm wondering if the Vexsis air has done something to you, like somehow remove the stick that was once permanently up your ass."

Draven snorts. "If it troubles you, so I won't answer any more questions from now on."

"Drama, drama, drama. You know that isn't what I--" My words lodge in my throat, along with bile that rises from my gut.

I stop in my tracks, almost stumbling into Draven as I lurch away from the windows of a shop. Inside, a young girl probably younger than me lays dead on the floor of the restaurant. Her ashen skin speaks volumes; she has been drained dry. Vampires laugh at their table, lips caked in blood. She died moments ago in terror, the expression frozen on her face. She isn't the only one either. I notice vampires clinging to the neck of a man, who's eyes

almost look relieved as he fades away. Another cries on the floor as vampires gnaw at her neck and wrists, but she doesn't fight or struggle. Is it because she knows it's pointless?

"Cyan," Draven calls, resting a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Look away."

I want to. I need to. I expected this long before Draven told me about it. That doesn't make seeing it any easier. His hand suddenly rests before my eyes, shielding me. I take a deep breath, trying to steel myself, and move away.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Draven mumbles, glancing over our shoulders. I do the same, infuriated to find the guards smirking. They enjoyed the show. "Things have changed. I didn't know a place like that was in our path."

"A place like that being a normal restaurant here?" I grumble under my breath.

"No. Most don't allow killing on the floor. It's messy."

I don't know if I like his honesty or not.

"I heard it wasn't always like this," he adds. "Before the Vampire Wars, feeding wasn't any different here than how mortals eat. We fed on the blood of animals here. That was our food source and it wasn't like... like this. Some twisted show."

"But this is revenge for the war and how they show their hatred," I finish, glancing at Draven, who nods.

"This is what hatred brews."

"It sucks. No pun intended." I manage to smile when Draven lets out a stifled laugh.

"Yeah, it definitely sucks, but hopefully this won't." He nods ahead towards City Central, which I now get a far better look at.

The fountain sits at the very center of a large circular stage. Buildings surround the area, but the flowers across the balconies and roofs cross over vines that all connect to the willow trees to form a giant canopy. Flower petals cover the smooth stone pathways that weave around the circle. The pop-up shops Draven spoke of are here, situated between the trees where sellers shout for the attention of everyone nearby. There's a crowd, but it isn't unbearable as central is much larger than I expected and it seems to be a spot more used by those who live outside of the city, simply based on how many are dressed. They look more like commoners or even tourists.

"This doesn't suck in the least," I say, offering Draven a smile.

"Let's start here and we can work our way around." He points at the first stall that has an arrangement of jewelry. We move from one shop to the next where every owner glares at me, but forces a kind tone because Draven's at my side. I also can't get any food as they do not offer any meals for humans. But I have the perfectionist butler at my side, he brought snacks. I didn't even notice he brought a small messenger bag with him.

"I sincerely hate you," I say even while digging into the chips Draven brought with him.

"You wouldn't be saying that after your stomach started rumbling and you realized you had no food," he argues.

"No, I'd still say it. It'd just be much meaner because I would also be hungry."

That gets me a second chuckle for the day. Have I set a new record? I feel like I've won a prize, although in the back of my mind I wish to earn another kind of award for this achievement. If only that could actually happen.

Draven and I sit on the edge of the fountain where he eats some type of blood noodle from a nearby stall. For a moment, I forget we're in Vexsis as I people watch. Couples flirt beneath the trees, passing flowers to one another or sharing a sweet kiss. A father chases his children around the fountain, laughing heartily when he catches them. Two mothers hold their son's hand

and swing him gently between them. A grandmother buys her granddaughter a pretty hairpin to set into her hair. Makes me think about Draven and his dad here getting snacks from the stalls or chasing each other through the fountain.

"What was he like? Your dad." I ask, looking at Draven.

Draven glances to the left where our guards have taken their eyes off us a bit. They've gotten themselves a meal too. They glance at us from time to time, but remain mostly focused on their food.

"He was kind," Draven replies, staring ahead in a trance-like state. "Affectionate to the point of embarrassment and funny in the most ridiculous of ways."

"And somehow he had you?" I snort at Draven's eye roll. "You must take after your mom."

"I wouldn't know. She died of a blood disease that's somewhat common among vampires when I was two. My father told me stories, but they never really helped me imagine what she was like."

This is the most I've learned about Draven in years. I always knew he was like the rest of us, orphaned and taken in by Lore. It's kind of an unspoken rule at Seymour estate not to pry too much into each other's pasts. We all understand there's trauma and we'll discuss what we want, when we want. Draven, obviously, isn't that talkative so I've heard very rare bits and pieces. I know that his dad remarried and the woman wasn't that kind, but didn't know more until now.

"I can understand that, in a way," I say softly. "I don't think I ever knew my parents. Both of them were too drunk or high out of their minds to show who they were before that. Though I guess it would make sense if I got the crazy gene from them."

"I don't know about that. I can't fathom there's anyone out there that's even remotely similar to you."

"You're implying that I'm special, but I remain unclear on whether that is a good or a bad thing."

Draven smirks, choosing to say nothing. He takes the trash from me to throw into a nearby trash can. I follow after him, insisting he inform me whether he likes or dislikes my "specialness." However, as we pass another stall, there's suddenly a loud noise behind us. I jolt in surprise, pivoting on my heel to see Warlords landing nearby. Fear rises within me until I hear a woman shout, "The aerial show! Honey, hurry!"

"Aerial show?" I manage to mutter before all hell breaks loose. People abruptly hurry around the stalls closer to the Warlords where their operators have stepped out to stand on the shoulders of the mechanical contraptions. I hear them shouting over a loud speaker about said aerial show, but my mind's buzzing with terror as person after person shoves past me.

I'm yanked out of the crowd towards a tree. Draven puts himself in front of me, keeping me shielded as my back presses against the tree. We're safe from the crowd pushing through the streets to get a look of the Warlords that are beginning to take off, but Draven doesn't step away. He keeps close, close enough that his chest brushes against mine with every breath. I can't tear my eyes away from him, admiring the fire of his eyes, his full lips and sharp jaw. I wish to reach out, run my fingers through his hair and kiss his lips. Maybe I would have if Draven didn't turn his attention to me, making my entire body lock up like a badly oiled machine.

"Are you alright?" He asks. "I should have thought about the airshows. They put them on sometimes when I was a kid. I didn't know they still did them."

I give a half-hearted nod. My attention's drawn to a few explosive blasts above us. The aerial warlords zip around the towers in quick patterns leaving behind trails of light. One shoots fireworks that can somehow be seen in the day. It's a beautiful display from machines that can wipe out hundreds in the blink of an eye.

We watch in silence, though half way through the show my gaze drifts back to Draven. He leans more comfortably towards me, as if he has forgotten

the position that we're in. The crowd's nowhere near us, but I haven't the willpower to tell him to move. Even as my breath catches, even as my fingers start to pick at the sleeves of my shirt, I can't bring myself to speak. I don't want to move. I want a moment of normalcy, where I can stand like this with Draven and enjoy the moment. I bite the inside of my cheek to focus on him, not this itching sensation gnawing with me. Think of his eyes, the way his hair tickles his brow, how big his hands are, how wide his shoulders are, how warm his body is next to mine.

The show ends. I only know this because the crowd starts to thin and Draven peers down at me. His eyes widen and he steps back, finally realizing how close he was.

"Sorry," he says. I try to hide my hands in my sleeves when he looks at them. I swear he almost frowns, but manages to keep a calm expression. "There are other places to go, if you want to."

"Uh, yeah, sure."

"We'll wait a few moments for the crowd to disperse."

I nod along, then look for our guards. I spot them through the crowd. They must have gotten separated from us during the show. At least they didn't see me oogling Draven like a starving dog. That would have been embarrassing.

Once the guards return, Draven explains that we're moving on. He guides us through a few streets where he grasps my hand without realizing it. At least that's what I think based on his eyes remaining trained on a few intricately dressed individuals stepping out of a store at the end of the street. I'm too busy focusing on our hands, the touch of his skin against mine. His hand's much bigger and skin much softer. I want to run my fingers over his palm and slip my fingers between his, but he's dragging us down an alley.

"We'll take another street," he says for some reason. I'm not wondering why. I'm too busy wondering if he'd be open to making this a daily occurrence. Of course, the moment that thought crosses my mind, my entire body starts to shake. Sweat forms on my brow.

"Draven," I call, knowing that if he doesn't let go I'll go into an itching fest. Maybe I'd be okay if I wasn't already over stimulated from earlier and the fact that the streets have grown busier.

Draven looks back at me, then at our hands. He releases me fast, like I've burned him.

"Sorry," he says. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah." I cover my hand with my sleeves, picking at the stray threads to keep myself from tearing into my skin.

Nodding, Draven continues on, though he continuously glances back at me as if he expects me to have a breakdown. I've gotten a lot better over the years, thank you very much. They aren't as frequent or severe, which I am eternally grateful for, but I fucking wish they'd vanish. Just evaporate, as if they were never there to begin with. I want to be normal. I want to be able to hold someone's hand, whether they're a partner or a friend. I barely remember what it's like to simply reach out for someone without expecting to have a fit afterwards.

At least Draven's next destination gets my mind off things again. It's a Magic Shop that makes me laugh the moment we step in the door. There are all kinds of books detailing how mortals use magic with absolutely horrendous explanations and drawings. This is definitely a place for kids, probably to scare them of mortals, but it makes me laugh.

"Ah, look here," I say when holding open a book. "It says that human spell casters can use dead body parts to reanimate corpses to seek out vampires for their personal snacks." I point the book menacingly at Draven, who rolls his eyes. "You better keep your eye out on my vampire-seeking zombies."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Do vampires believe this stuff?" I ask, searching through a few shelves of "potions" that are definitely just water with food coloring in it.

"Some do. Kids, mostly. I think it's just a way for parents to scare them in case they ever come across a mage."

"Did your dad really bring you here?"

"No, I stumbled in and became fascinated with it. This made me believe mages could grant wishes."

"That's adorable. I didn't know you were ever adorable."

Draven shakes his head. "I was a *very* cute kid, if I do say so myself."

"Mhm. Sure." I hand a few items to Draven. He raises a brow. "I'm getting these. They're funny."

Smirking, Draven steps over to the counter to pay for everything. The rest of our day goes like this, occasionally stopping at stores that interest me or taking elevators to the top floors of buildings to look out at the amazing view. All of it almost makes me forget about what's happening around us; vampires continuing to lug around mortals on chains or being catered by them like, well, like slaves. No one even bats an eye when a man gets slapped for who knows what. It's integrated into their society, just like the mistreatment of vampires and dhampir is integrated into ours.

We leave city central in the late afternoon. Lore and Seren will likely be back before dinner so Draven wants to double check that the house is being properly attended to. I don't see why. It was "properly attended to" while they were gone for months so, obviously, the workers are capable of handling it themselves. When we arrive at the townhouse, one of the maids comes rushing into the foyer with a slightly frantic expression.

"There's a messenger here for His Grace," she says, forcing a cordial smile.

"A messenger?" Draven repeats. "They couldn't have left a message with you?"

"He's adamant about speaking to His Grace."

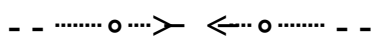
"Who is it?" Draven asks while stepping towards the lounge before the maid answers. I follow him with the maid scurrying at our side. Inside the lounge, a vampire sits on the couch donning a freakishly jovial smile. His eyes squint too much when he smiles like that.

"Draven Morrow," he says, rising slowly. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Sir Trolley." Draven forces a polite grin that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm sure you've already been informed that His Grace is busy at his factory today. Whatever message you have can be left with me."

Trolley shakes his head. "I'm afraid not. His Royal Majesty, Morren Valyork, wishes for me to speak with Lord Seymour himself."

Morren Valyork? Shit, what does he want?



Cyan and Draven had a date--I mean, a day on the town. There were some tense moments between them, hmm? And Cyan saw the way mortals are treated in Vexsis. Are you surprised by their treatment? And what could the king want with talk to Lore about?!

72. Can't I Be Worried?

Seren P.O.V.

Another boring day at the factory where I spent most of the time avoiding Lore's many attempts to hold my hand, which I know he was doing to tease me, finally comes to an end. But when we arrive at Lore's estate, Draven waits in the foyer donning an unusually upset frown.

"Your Grace, Sir Trolley is here to see you," he says, causing Lore to tense. "He has a message from His Majesty and wishes to speak to you himself."

"So be it." Lore follows Draven towards the lounge. He gestures for me to follow. Draven leaves once we enter the room. A vampire waits alone on the couch. His eerie smile twitches when I enter the room. I almost expect his expression to shatter, revealing whatever foul feelings are beneath, but the messenger of a king likely has to be very skilled at keeping their composure.

"Lord Seymour," Trolley says. He rises from the couch to extend his hand for Lore to shake. "I hope you've been enjoying your stay here in Vexsis and that things are moving swimmingly at your factory."

"My work is moving along as I had hoped and we should be returning to earth by the end of the week, if things keep up. So," Lore takes a seat in one of the chairs. "What are you here to discuss?"

Trolley's gaze drifts to me. He hesitates, eying me skeptically when I take a seat in the chair opposite from Lore. If I sat on the couch with Trolly, his head may explode and our chaperones would probably assume I used a spell to kill him. Better to keep my distance.

Clearing his throat, Trolley says, "His Majesty has invited you and the paladin of the Holy Church to Blue Wing Manor for a dinner party tomorrow night."

What?

I glance at Lore, who keeps a composed expression. He forces a cordial smile. "An invitation from the king's messenger, how flattering, although I must admit that I'm surprised to hear Seren has been invited."

Why am I almost offended by that?

"It isn't everyday that members of the Holy Church visit Vexsis. His Majesty wishes to show that we are welcoming," Trolly replies with such a joyous tone that I almost believe him. I'm surprised when he shifts his attention to me. "Our guests tomorrow night would be thrilled to see magic from the true source. Many have never seen it in person and there are so many tall tales. Your appearance would be appreciated."

So I'm a show pony? The question almost slips out of my mouth, but I bite it back.

"I suppose it couldn't do any harm to go," I say, checking on Lore, who gives no sign that I'm saying the wrong thing.

"Splendid." Trolley rises and claps his hands. "A car will be sent for the both of you at eight. And I must remind you, Lord Seymour, that your butler may not attend. This is a private event."

Lore nods. "Of course. We appreciate the invitation."

I don't know how they can keep up this back and forth. It's exhausting just listening.

Lore calls for Draven, who returns with Trolley's coat. I don't see why he needs one. It's a warm day, but whatever, much be a rich person thing. Lore walks Trolley to the door. I follow behind because I think that's what I'm meant to do. Draven waits patiently, holding the door open as Lore and Trolley exchange a few pleasantries, then the vampire leaves.

"You will be alone with Cyan tomorrow evening as Seren and I attend a party at Blue Wing Manor," Lore says to Draven, who actually gapes.

"They invited Seren?" He glances at me, and I swear there's concern in his eyes.

"Yes, you and Cyan cannot attend though. Do me a favor and inform him for me?"

Draven's lips form a thin line. "As you wish, Your Grace."

"You know it wouldn't kill you to tell him no," I say, but Draven struts past me without uttering another word.

"Any idea on why the king invited us?" I ask while following Lore to the lounge.

"I could make a list," he replies, grabbing a bottle of wine from a glass cabinet along with two glasses. "He could try to convince me to sell my mine. He has tried that on numerous occasions, but I can't see why he'd want to invite you."

I take a seat on the couch, watching Lore pour a glass for the both of us. He hands one to me while speaking over the rim of his own, "It could be an act of good faith, showing the church that we can be civil, only for him to start trouble later. There's really no telling with Valyork. I heard he was a very great man once, but the years have not been kind to him."

"Which means he won't be kind to us," I say.

Lore sits next to me on the couch, tossing one leg over the other. "Certainly not, however, there is more than Valyork you'll have to worry about at that party."

"Obviously. We'll be surrounded by vampires who would love to sink their teeth into me."

"I fear it's worse than that." Lore scans me like he's attempting to decipher if he should tell me what's worse. "Valyork's children may be more of a pain than he is. Each one is a golden eyed vampire with all the best tech money can be. If you thought the Warlords at the airstation were intimidating,

theirs are nightmarish. They aren't even permitted to be viewed by the public."

"Do you believe I would see them?" I ask, trying not to think about how a part of me almost wishes for a fight. I know how to fight. It's familiar and, lately, I've been craving familiarity. "Causing me harm could result in another war," I add.

"And that's exactly what his children want. Valyork is paranoid because his influence is failing after the last war. He isn't confident to start another, even if he wishes to do so. As most nobles are, his children are kind to his face and cruel behind his back. There have been more and more rumors about them trying to start trouble as an excuse for another war where they can make a name for themselves and push him out of power."

"Let me guess, this is the part where you tell me not to leave your side for the whole evening?"

Lore smirks. "I'd prefer if you didn't leave my side for the rest of my life."

I take a long drink after that one and choose to pretend I didn't hear him. "Who am I looking out for then?"

"The two most dangerous ones to worry about are his eldest daughter, Roemithia, and his fourteenth son, Maxwell." Lore sets aside his finished drink. He reaches over to rest his hand on my arm. "Roemithia and Maxwell have some unpleasant traits."

"And you're worried they're going to get the better of me if given the chance?" I ask, basking a bit in the concern evident in his eyes.

"Seren," he says. His hand gently moves down my arm to take my hand. I don't stop him when he interlocks our fingers. I like it. "I know what you wish to say, you wish to remind me that you are a paladin of the Holy Church capable of handling himself."

I finish my drink and smack my lips together, grinning at Lore's eye roll. "Yes, I am. They don't frighten me. Stop worrying so much."

"Am I not allowed to worry?" He asks, bringing up his other hand to rest beneath my chin. He forces me to look at him, immediately caught in his ocean eyes. "I want you to be safe."

"Then I guess you should work extra hard at staying by my side all night," I whisper, too caught up in these feelings to battle against Lore leaning in to take my lips. Every kiss is as good as the first. They make me forget, make me lose myself. I lean into him, basking in the feel of his lips. His scent. And the gentle caress of his thumb against my pulse.

When we break apart, my mind's a haze. I could try blaming it on the alcohol, but why bother at this point? Lore's caught me. I don't know if he'll let go. I don't think I want to go.

"Why don't we head to my room and discuss our plans for tomorrow?" He asks, wearing a charming smile that urges me to agree.

"I... that..." I can't bring myself to say yes though. Something's stopping me even after I thought the fear had faded. I feel like we're moving too fast. I haven't caught up yet.

Maybe Lore sees that because he releases me. I'm grateful he doesn't pull away, continuing to lean towards me as he says, "Or we may continue speaking here and go to my room another time for a different conversation, preferably one more appropriate for the bedroom."

That gets a chuckle out of me and a small ounce of courage to say, "Yeah, just not... this is a lot."

"I know." He kisses my cheek, then retreats to give me some breathing room. "As I was saying about Roemithia and Maxwell, you should know their traits. Roemithia can get into your mind, see your memories, and even put herself in them. All it takes is for you to feel a little self-doubt. She has tormented people into madness without ever touching them."

Self-doubt. Not good on my part. Especially right now. The church and Lore, I'm filled with doubt. Traits like that are difficult to fight against unless you've already been caught and break yourself from their hold.

"And Maxwell is capable of speaking to the dead, which sounds like very little until you have an army of lost souls ripping out your guts," Lore adds.

"That is very unpleasant and oddly specific. Have you seen--"

"I rather not relive it," Lore interjects, making me grimace. "He likes to show off sometimes at parties. They're all repulsive and troublesome, but they are the worst. I'll point them out to you."

"Thanks for the warning." I grip Lore's hand a little tighter. "And don't forget that I am capable of protecting myself. And maybe you, if I'm feeling generous."

"If you're feeling generous?" He repeats mockingly as he leans in again to brush his lips against mine. "Is there anything in particular I have to do to earn your generosity?"

"Um... another kiss might do the trick." I barely finished my sentence before Lore's kissing me again. My fingers twist into his hair. He wraps an arm around my shoulders, bringing me closer. I feel the world shift as my body rests between his thighs. Lore lies on his back on the couch, hungrily kissing me like this is the first. Not that I'm any better. I can't get enough of him, leaning in for another and another, even some that are brief and nothing more than a peck. They're simple and sweet, but it still makes my toes curl.

Is this okay? This back and forth? The flirting? It's so much so fast. I do want it. But then my mind goes fuzzy and I panic. I'm scared of what may happen if I accept these feelings, this... sense of perfect normalcy.

I push away from Lore, peering down at his flushed features and messy hair. Courtesy of me.

"We should, um, dinner's probably about done so Cyan or Draven might show up," I say in a poor attempt to end this before I do follow Lore back to his room only to panic afterwards.

I'm relieved Lore doesn't push it. He gives a slow nod just in time for us to hear Cyan coming down the stairs complaining about not receiving an invitation to the party. I jump off of Lore and hurry to fix my hair. By the time Cyan comes into the lounge, we're both composed. Physically, at least. I'm a mess internally and I can't imagine I'll be much better at the party.

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Valyork has invited Seren and Lore to a party. Could this be a trap or is he truly just trying to be civil? Will Valyork's children start any trouble? And the relationship between our boys continues to advance. They're really incapable of keeping their hands off each other at this point. Will Seren give in to Lore and choose to try a relationship or will he continue fighting these feelings?

73. The Siblings

With the party happening so soon, Lore summons a tailor to make me a new suit appropriate for the event. Without asking me for my opinion, of course. Since Lore still has work, he heads to the mine alone today while I get my suit prepared. It's strange how normal it feels to wear one, even if the time spent in a suit is nothing compared to all the years I was in a robe. I try to request colors for my suit, but the tailor immediately tells me that Lore gave him very specific instructions. Great...

It's late when Lore returns. I don't even see him, only hear him speaking in the hallway as we both prepare for the event. The tailor's finicking with my cufflinks when he knocks on the door.

"Seren, are you dressed?" Lore asks.

"Yes."

The door opens. I swallow hard upon seeing that Lore has gotten us matching suits. Both are a deep maroon in color with golden accents. Lore has his hair in a high ponytail, showing off his broad shoulders and sharp features. He gazes at me for a long moment, eyes moving over my body that grows abnormally hot.

"Thanks for coming over on such short notice," Lore says to the tailor. "We can take the rest from here. My butler will pay you at the door."

The tailor gives a polite nod and scurries out of the room to follow Draven, who doesn't stop himself from taking a moment to eye us suspiciously through the door. It's clear Draven and Cyan suspect something's going on between me and Lore, but these matching suits are going to confirm those theories. I'm about to bring that up when Lore takes hold of my collar, adjusting it.

"You really haven't gotten any better at wearing suits," he says and rests his hands on my chest. He feels the embroidery along the edges with a soft look

in his eyes. "And yet you still look breathtaking in them."

"I don't know about that," I say, blushing when Lore takes my wrist to gently finish putting on my cufflinks. "You look far better than me."

"Oh? Are you complimenting me?" Lore leans in. His every word brushes against my lips. "Be more specific."

"Don't put me on the spot like that."

"But I want to hear." Lore rests his forehead against mine. "Tell me what you think."

"You... you look beautiful," I admit, falling into cerulean eyes that have a truly wicked hold on me. "No one will be able to take their eyes off you."

"Your tone makes me think that bothers you."

"It might."

There's a sparkle in Lore's eyes. He looks like he wants to say something, but he kisses me for a long moment instead.

"Don't fret," he whispers against my lips. "I'm yours and yours alone if that's what you wish."

I kiss him again, unsure of what to say or how to express how I feel. It's strange because I know how to express myself, but it feels different with Lore. I know why. I know that, in the back of my mind, the fear is still there, but I'm trying. I want to try. This is so much more than I thought I could ever feel. A wall once stood within me, keeping fearful thoughts at bay, but that wall has cracked and those emotions have come flooding out. They're drowning me. Lore's drowning me and I don't have it in me to reach for the surface.

Another knock sounds at the door. Which is thankfully closed.

"Your Grace, the car is here," Draven says, successfully ending our kiss. Although, by the way Lore bites at my bottom lip, I doubt this will be the

last of the evening.

"We'll be right there," Lore calls, looking over me once more to check for any flaws. He must see none because he steps away. I follow, keeping my eyes on anything but his--damn it all--his ass. It really looks great in that suit. It always looks great, but I might be feeling a bit overwhelmed tonight and--damn it, I'm totally staring. Stop staring at his ass!

The car waits for us outside. It's a deep navy in color with black windows so you can't see inside. The driver opens the door. We slide in. The seats are even cushier than the last one we drove in, though that makes sense if this came from the palace. The king would want to show off his luxury by sending out fancy cars for his guests. I guess I won't complain since we have a smooth ride through the city. At some point, Lore takes my hand, holding it between our thighs. I pretend not to notice because I like the feeling.

We pass through the city to cross a long solid white bridge over a river. Up ahead, I spot the castle that some may suspect to be its own town. The towers reach far into the sky while a long, tall wall encircles the entire complex. The car comes upon the smooth surface of the gate where carvings of vampires, what I'm presuming to be previous rulers, are on the doors. They swing open to reveal the massive complex beyond, nature woven into building after building. I don't know where to look, overwhelmed by the intricacy of carvings and wild flowers coloring the yard.

The car stops in front of a brightly lit circular building where others ascend the stairs to a pair of large open doors. Light filters out, helping the street lamps illuminate the sidewalks. A butler opens the car door. Lore steps out, waiting for me. The bright lights blind me momentarily, then I feel it; a pressure. So many eyes are already on us. The vampires on the stairs gaze in our direction, even the butler stares a little too long.

"You must be loving this," I whisper to Lore as we ascend the stairs. He cocks his head. "All this attention is on you."

"While I do enjoy the attention, I'd much rather have you and you alone gazing upon me so intently."

Somehow he's getting even more frequent with his flirting. That may be my fault. Earlier, flirting back, and everything that has been going on. It's a lot. I wouldn't say I dislike it though. I guess, I almost feel bad that I can't always respond.

Once through the doors, we step into a foyer bathed in silver and blue light. It's as if the king plucked the night sky itself to use as a backdrop for his ball. Past the foyer, in the dance hall, lords, ladies, and lieges dance and chatter in merry. Music plays from an orchestra at the far end of the hall. Their instruments look different, but the sounds are the same.

"How does this normally go?" I ask.

A maid walks by offering drinks that, obviously, aren't meant for me. Lore holds up a hand, waving her past us.

"Normally, I don't have a human guest," Lore replies. "But the night is usually made up of forced pleasantries. Some dancing and--" he gives me a slow once over. "Ends with sex."

I almost choke on my own saliva. Lore chuckles.

"Here I thought you wouldn't be so blunt about that," I say.

"I'm merely trying to will my wish of how this night will end into existence." Lore gasps when I glare at him. "Don't look at me like that, pervert. I never said it had anything to do with you."

I roll my eyes at him. "Maybe I should have asked Draven to make me a care package. There's nothing I can eat or drink here."

"I saw a fountain outside." Lore smiles at the second glare I send him. "Just a suggestion."

A suggestion I choose to ignore, as we're being ignored by many. Although, a small group does eventually make their way towards us. There's not much

for me to do as Lore speaks to the group. Apparently, one woman has a nellore factory not far from Lore's. They have some business chit chat until a sneering weasel looks at me and asks, "I wasn't aware we were permitted to bring blood bags. What did you have to do to get permission from His Majesty to bring your own?"

"Don't call me that," I say, causing the group to bristle as if I've slapped each across the face.

"This is Seren, a paladin of the Holy Church," Lore explains, which worsens the tension. I'm surprised none of them try to lunge at me. "He was invited by His Majesty, so I suggest you show him the utmost respect."

"Of course," the weaseling man says. "My apologies... Paladin."

He doesn't sound apologetic.

"Lord Seymour," a familiar voice calls. The group's attention turns to Trolley, the messenger who invited us here. He gives the same forced smile as when he was in Lore's lounge. Gesturing towards the foyer, he says, "His Royal Majesty would like to have a word with you. Alone."

"I do believe it'd be disrespectful for me to leave Seren behind. Whatever His Majesty has to say, I'm sure Seren can hear it," Lore replies.

Trolley's smile makes his eyes wrinkle. "His Royal Majesty was very adamant that you come alone and, should you not, he orders you to leave Vexsis immediately."

Whoa, dramatic. He could give Lore a run for his money.

Lore faces me donning a concerned scowl.

"I'll be fine," I reassure him, although I may not feel as confident as I once did. Being in a room with hundreds of vampires, no doubt with Warlords very nearby, even I will have trouble against a group. I'd like to think Valyork is paranoid, but not a complete idiot as to have me slaughtered in the middle of a ball he so clearly invited me to.

Lore steps closer to me. I almost expect him to kiss me and I don't know if I have it in me to stop him. But then he leans towards my ear to whisper, "Keep an eye out for Roemithia and Maxwell. I've yet to see them, but they will arrive eventually. Roemithia has red hair, darker than Draven's and a rose tattoo on her shoulder. Maxwell has short black hair and a very punchable face."

"Thanks, that doesn't narrow it down. Most of the people here have very punchable faces," I say, smiling at Lore's little smirk.

"Am I included in those people?"

"I've never wanted to punch someone more than you."

"Lord Seymour," Trolley calls, forcing Lore to step away from me. That might be a good thing. He looked like he was about to kiss me again. In front of everyone.

I watch Lore follow Trolley out of the ball room. He stops once at the doors, looking at me, then disappearing into the foyer. The group has already left too, leaving me to stand near the wall alone and without even a beverage to keep me company. Why did they have to mix blood in their alcohol?

Time ticks away. A few vampires look as if they're going to approach me, then back out. I spot a few seeming to make a bet. I'm guessing younger vampires, but it's always hard to tell. A girl stomps towards me, looks me dead in the eye, puffs out her cheeks, then spins on heel and goes running back. I give her credit for trying. Although none have started anything with me, my gut twists. There isn't a clock in here, but it feels like Lore has been gone for a while. He's focused on me, but I'm worried about what the king wants with him too.

When I'm about to head to the foyer in hopes to find Trolley and make him take me to find Valyork, I notice a man in the crowd. Gold eyes. Short black hair. A very punchable face indeed. He's smug, laughing so loudly that I can hear him over the music almost halfway across the ballroom. He's dressed in lavish gold from head to toe. One could see him from a mile away. His

attention strays to me. A devious grin slips onto his face. This must be Maxwell or, at the very least, a very annoying lord. I make way towards a pair of doors leading out onto a terrace, pushing past a few vampires who hiss vile remarks.

By escaping out onto the terrace though, I've managed to run into the other person I'm meant to avoid. A red haired, gold-eyed vampire with a rose tattoo on her shoulder stands directly in front of me. Her sinister smirk resembles the man's from inside, and her voice oozes fake sweetness, "Good evening, Paladin of the Holy Church."

I stand tall and feign ignorance. "Sorry, do I know you?"

"I am Roemithia Valyork," she replies, not seeming offended that I asked.

She's alone, which I find odd until I glance around the terrace. Everyone is leaving without her having to say so. The doors behind me shut. On the other end of the terrace, the man in gold walks out. He shuts those doors too and heads for us.

"This here is my younger brother," Roemithia says, gesturing towards him. "Maxwell."

The one who made himself known so I'd try to sneak out the back door. I should have gone for the foyer.

"Let's skip the forced pleasantries, what do the two of you have to say to me? The sooner we get this done, the sooner I can leave," I say.

Roemithia will be tougher to deal with than Maxwell. An army of the undead would be a pain, but I can fight against them. A vampire who gets into your head due to doubt? She's the worst person I can go up against right now. I try to prepare myself, which doesn't go by unnoticed.

"Lord Seymour warned him about us," Maxwell says, smiling so his fangs peek over his bottom lip. "He's trying to shield himself from you, Roemithia."

"Excellent. I love a challenge." She takes my arm. I grasp her wrist, prepared to snap it like a twig when she frowns. "Come now, there's no need to be so rash. We merely wish to take a walk."

"We can walk without you touching me." I pull my arm away from her.

"Oh?" She pouts like a child, then looks at Maxwell, who gives a similar expression of forced surprise. "I always thought members of the Holy Church loved affection from pretty, young things."

She put emphasis on the word *young* and I don't miss the implications. I try not to think about Priest Aja. I try not to feel any fear, any doubt.

"Maybe you aren't his type. Maybe strapping young lads are this type," Maxwell says while holding out his arm. When I don't take hold, he leans over to whisper. "Or he was the strapping young lad for someone."

I force myself not to brace my hands into fists, but my toes still curl in my shoes. My jaw starts to ache from how hard I'm clenching my teeth.

"I'm tired of the jabs. What do you really want to discuss?" I ask, interrupting their shared snickering. I glance towards the windows of the ballroom. No one's bothering to look our way, acting as if none are aware of what's happening outside.

"Skipping the foreplay? I shouldn't be surprised. The church has never been much fun," Roemithia says, turning her back to me. She steps further out onto the terrace towards the gardens. Maxwell nods for me to follow. I do because I'm certain there are guards at the doors to prevent me from going back inside. I don't want to start a fight. At the very least, I can wait for them to strike and claim self defense, which would put them in the wrong rather than me.

"Like I said, we wish to have a walk with you," Roemithia claims. She faces me again, leaning against the stone railing around the terrace.

"Does this walk end at a cliff where you hope to push me off to my death? Because I fear that I know a few spells to prevent that from happening."

For some reason, my words make Roemithia's eyes shimmer like a child who found their new favorite toy. The air grows cold. Maxwell releases a low chuckle. I shift my attention between the two of them.

"There are no cliffs nearby, although you have given me a brilliant idea. I wouldn't mind having one to take a few of my enemies to," Maxwell speaks up, nodding far too vigorously at the idea of murder.

"Why have cliffs when we have Warlords? I'd rather drop them from the clouds and follow their screams until they splatter against the ground," Roemithia adds, making me grimace as the two laugh heartily.

"Well, this conversation has been incredibly unpleasant and I can see you're just trying to annoy me. I'm going to search for His Grace and we'll take our leave," I say, pivoting on my heel to head back. Maxwell moves to grab my hand. I step away before he can, narrowing my eyes threateningly. "You can't touch me either."

Maxwell holds up his hands in surrender. "My humblest apologies, great paladin. I just think it's a bit rude to leave our discussion before we even started. It's so rare for a member of the church to visit Vexsis, let alone our home."

"Father Dearest doesn't typically like them around. It reminds everyone about the war," Roemithia adds. "Forgive us for being curious about why he decided to invite you here."

"Maybe he wishes to show some civility, to show that we can all get along." I want to take that back the moment I've said it, but it's too late. The sneers on Roemithia and Maxwell's faces say exactly what most everyone feels; *that could never happen.*

"Peculiar," Roemithia says, pushing herself away from the railing to step towards me. "I've never heard anyone, let alone a paladin, even bring up the possibility of our species coexisting peacefully. Is that a common feeling among the church now?"

I don't answer. She'll find a way to trap me if I do. I need to get out of here.

"And the church certainly couldn't have sent you to discuss anything like that," she says. Their wide grins give me an eerie feeling.

"I was not sent by the church. I am working with Lord Seymour in Silra to search for the Red Moon group. I tagged along in case we saw any signs of them along the way or even here," I explain, which is a believable enough lie, but the siblings don't appear to buy it. They both eye me skeptically.

"Sure, let's say that's true." Roemithia smiles viciously. "But I don't want to talk about that. Let's return to the previous topic. Civility between our races, what do you think about that, Paladin? Do you believe it can be done?"

"Certainly not," Maxwell says. "Doesn't the church beat that out of their kids? I hear training is brutal."

"Barbaric," Roemithia adds. "And if that's how they train, what else could they be doing?"

My past flashes before my eyes. I force the memories back and hold my ground.

"And what happens to those who fail the program?" Maxwell's eyes shimmer, similar to how Roemithia's did earlier. It's a new question I've been asking myself, one that makes my blood run cold.

"What the church does is none of your concern," I say.

"But it is. If we're meant to get along, why would we want to support a system that harms children?" Roemithia gasps, placing a delicate hand over her heart. "We have to know about one another in order to make friends, don't you think? So, tell us. What happened during training, Seren?"

Hearing my name from her vile lips makes me squirm. And I'm done with this conversation.

"Have a good evening," I say to them, attempting to leave. I can go around front to the foyer rather than battling those at the terrace doors--

"Spells!" Roemithia calls. I stop and glance back at her curiously. Her eyes shine brilliantly, the purest gold I've ever seen. "Earlier, you said spells."

"What?" I ask.

"You said you knew a few spells to save you from stumbling off a cliff." She moves slowly towards me. "I thought the church didn't approve of such language."

"Or even mentioning that we can co-exist," Maxwell says.

I can't breathe for a moment, then argue, "You must have misheard me. I said cast."

"No, you said *spells* ." She stands in front of me, a maddening look in her eyes. "Could it be that you're second guessing your feelings towards the church, Paladin?"

I swallow hard, telling myself not to panic. This is what she wants.

"I wouldn't blame you for coming to hate them. The church is more vile than you could ever imagine," she says, circling me with slow steps. "They spew lie after lie to brainwash a nation, to capture their children to use as pawns in a much bigger game. You must realize that now, don't you? That there's a lot behind the curtain that you do not see and now you're starting to second guess everything."

I hurry away from the terrace, moving faster and faster through the gardens towards the front entrance.

"I know what happens to them!" Roemithia shouts. I tell myself not to stop, but--"The children who fail the tests, I know what became of so many of them."

Clenching my eyes, I tell myself that she's toying with me. This is a way to get into my head, but there's a voice at the back of my mind screaming; *how? How can she know? If she does know, what does that mean? How can--*

A cold sensation washes over me. My limbs feel limp. It's hard to breathe. There's someone behind me. I stumble away towards the closest path; the gardens. The lights from the ballroom illuminate Roemithia's dark silhouette following me through the tall garden walls.

"Got you," she whispers, smiling viciously.

My mind goes black.

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Hello, hello friends~ Big news; VOLUME TWO OF MY STORY, SPEAK THE TRUTH, IS NOW AVAILABLE AS AN eBOOK AND PAPERBACK ON AMAZON!! FINALLY!!!! There is going to be three volumes, the third of which will launch by the end of Nov/beginning of Dec. If you're interested in an enemies to lovers romance with a lot of character development, check out the series. Or if you're an OG reader, there has been plenty of editing plus an extra chapter in volume three that has only been available on my patreon. Anywho, I left a direct link to Volume One, you can click on the "Book 1 of 2" section of amazon to see both volumes in the series. If you're on your phone, there's a link on my dashboard so just go to my profile or go to amazon and search Speak the Truth Volume One Twoony

Anyway, yeah, whoa, Seren has run into the vampire king's children and he has been caught by Roemithia! Will he be able to escape her clutches?

74. Paladin VS Warlords

I'm back at the farm, stuck in a nightmare I've had a thousand times. Standing in the field, I watch in terror as vampires rip my family to shreds. But this time, I'm not alone.

"So this is where the sob story begins," Roemithia says, circling me like a lioness stalking her prey. A long nail runs across my shoulders. The touch feels real. I can even feel the grass brushing against my legs and the cold wind. But I'm incapable of moving.

"Stop with the mind games," I spit, glaring at the woman who continues to watch the horror. I hear my family screaming, refusing to look. Refusing to give her the satisfaction of seeing sorrow, hatred, and fear on my face.

"I've lived this many times already. Your tricks don't bother me," I say.

"They don't?" Her smile twists into a terror I've never imagined one to show. "You shouldn't lie, Seren. It doesn't suit you."

The vision of my family vanishes in wisps of black smoke. I'm falling through nothing, an endless abyss where the wind whistles painfully in my ears. Then that darkness explodes into light and I'm standing on solid ground.

We reappear on the training grounds of Trinia. The world seems so big. I realize that's because it is. I'm somehow my younger self, barely thirteen and standing against a boy twice my size. My gaze drifts to Roemithia's smirk behind the boy, and thus, I miss the fist he sends my way. One hit to my jaw and I'm spitting blood. Pain ripples through me, the familiar pain of training where every part of me aches. I knew I wasn't healing properly, that I was pushing myself. As a kid, I didn't care. I yearned to impress them. To earn my place.

I hit the ground hard, tasting my own blood. Paladin Nallin storms over.

"Get up, Seren!" She demands, grasping me by the arm. I barely manage to stand. My swollen eyes take in her lumbering form that always frightened me. It's like I'm really here, that it's not just a memory. I feel the pain and the terror and the desperation. I want to cry out. I want to scream.

"On the battlefield, there is always a chance that you will face someone bigger than you. You have to prepare for it. Are you going to give up?" Nallin growls.

I whimper, feeling tears in my eyes. I try to push them back because I'm not that kid anymore. The emotions swirl within me though, stronger than I've ever felt. It isn't that Roemithia's making me relive these memories. It's as if she's really taken me back in time. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm so scared.

"Are you crying?" She hisses. "Are you a coward, Seren?"

"N-No," I croak.

"Then get up. Get back in there!" She shoves me towards the brute of a boy. Another hit and another and another. Each hurts more than the last. I hear Roemithia's laughter surrounding us. I catch a glimpse of her slim figure as she watches me stumble and fall, eventually laying there in my own blood.

"The greater good," she sings. I hear her steps growing closer. "That's what you people like to say, isn't it?"

Roemithia's golden eyes block out the sun when she leans over me. Her red hair tickles my cheeks, the color resembles my own blood that I taste on my tongue.

"You're so scared, aren't you?" She asks. "So terrified that you went through all this for nothing."

"Shut up." I wheeze.

"But that's not all that frightens you, is it?" She laughs, enjoying this. "You're scared to see yourself for what you really are."

"And what's that?"

The vision fades again. Black smoke engulfs me. I'm too tired to even attempt struggling against the darkness.

Then I reappear on the sidelines of a battle. I recognize it immediately. An uprising within the bordering cities to the capital where vampires and dhampir gathered. Flames roar in the background, overtaking the city. A younger version of me stands among the rubble, swathed in golden ethereal light as if he were an angel, though he's certainly anything but. Blood soaks his axe, stains his robes, and drips from his face where a wicked smile rests on his lips. One I can't believe I ever made, especially as he slices clean through a vampire's neck.

"You're a murderer," Roemithia whispers. She isn't beside me. She's merely here, in my mind, speaking into me. "You enjoyed every moment of it."

"I didn't." I wish I sounded convincing. How can I when I'm watching him giddily smile while cutting through one vampire after another, like they're nothing? Like they aren't worth more than the dirt beneath his boots.

His grin grows maddening wide, eyes ablaze with golden light. No civilians. No allies. He can cause destruction without concern, so he does. He jumps into the air, a stream of light, and he rains hellfire. The vampires fall in droves, screaming as the flames take them. And he stands among the ruins, haughtily tossing the handle of the axe on his shoulder in victory.

"The church sent you to spy on Lord Seymour, didn't they? Hoping you would discover something heinous about him. I guess it would take a wicked man to know one," she says.

"Shut up!" I bellow, turning my back to the man I refuse to acknowledge. "You're a liar. You're messing with me."

"I don't see lies, little paladin," she whispers as the world fades to black once more. "I only see the truth," she finishes when we reappear in the cold, dark basement I fear more than anything.

Straps dig into my wrists and ankles. The air smells stale. I can't move. I'm a terrified seventeen year old again struggling to breathe. Priest Aja stands at the bottom of my bed, leering.

"Stop this," I order, sounding more desperate.

Priest Aja crawls on top of the bed. His wicked smile doesn't sit right on his face, like the skin's too tight. She can warp my memory. He looks more and more demonic, eyes almost black and nails long. He reaches towards me to caress my cheek.

"Get off me!" I scream, biting back a whimper when he leans in to press a kiss against my cheek.

I don't hear Roemithia anymore. I don't know if she's here. It seems she has found a memory to trap me in. One that will truly torture me, one that has me crying out when I feel Priest Aja's hands grasping the hem of my pants. The panic grows. And the rage. Not only towards Roemithia, but also Priest Aja and the church and myself. The fact that they let this happen to children. That people no doubt are aware of what happened to us while we were drugged up. How I shouldn't have been given a weapon rather than help. How I went around slaughtering people under a lie. The rage boils over, engulfing me. Fire courses through my veins. Divinity pulsating, wishing to break free, and it does.

The memories explode into vast colors, then blinding white. I hear Roemithia shout. I feel myself drop. I hit something. My fingers tears into the grass. My eyes open. We're not on the terrace anymore. Roemithia, Maxwell, and I have somehow made it into a maze where I lay at the center in an open square, far from prying eyes. Maxwell stands by a fountain, shock evident in his eyes. Roemithia lays beside me clutching her head. I broke free of her trait and now... I'm fucking furious.

"You're going to regret that," I growl.

Roemithia gives a lopsided smirk. "Am I? No harm was done, so I don't see how you can get away with--"

I hold out my hand. Her eyes widen. Golden light swirls in my grasp. She narrowly falls on her back to avoid the ball of searing light scorching her way. The sphere hits the hedge, setting it ablaze.

"I'm not going to let you get away with what you did." I rise to my feet, letting the divinity course through me. The magic lies as a golden fog on top of my skin.

"There's no one here," I say, grinning at the surprised expressions on their faces. "It's just us, so I won't be holding back."

I raise my hands, muttering a spell I would never use if innocents were nearby. Clouds form overhead. Lighting strikes all around us, catching fire to other parts of the maze. That fire roars, blazing higher and higher. Inching towards us.

Roemithia and Maxwell tap their wrists in identical fashion. They retreat from me when I form a golden axe in my hand. It doesn't feel as right as the real one, but it will do. I force power into my steps, making me as fast as they are. I swipe at Roemithia's neck first. She narrowly evades. Maxwell appears behind me. He brings down his clawed hand. I spin around to grab his wrist and snap the bone. He doesn't scream, but he does send a kick into my chest. I stumble back a step, then pivot away from Roemithia's jab.

One twist of his wrist and Maxwell's bones are healed. The siblings stand on either side of me. Maxwell mumbles something under his breath. The air feels colder. Through the roaring orange flames, I catch a glimpse of blue silhouettes inching closer. The dead souls Lore warned me about. One spell from me and a golden globe envelops the square we stand in. I expect Maxwell to be annoyed. His souls are trapped outside the shield, smacking uselessly against it, but he and Roemithia smirk.

Shadows pass overhead. I look up to see two spiraling dark masses. With a spell I jump into the air, hovering above the destroyed maze as the masses shatter beneath the enormous weight and size of two Warlords. Their sleek ebony armor glistens like obsidian, but there's something odd about them. Something different and unsettling.

"Like what you see?" Maxwell laughs.

I can no longer see him, but the Warlord on the right moves. The machine stands tall, towering over the nearby buildings. Atop its heads, a pair of eyes open. Not mechanical, real, like the Warlord is alive. I notice bits beneath the metal where there seems to be muscle or some mangled form of it. Roemithia's Warlord is the same, lurching over me with taloned hands. They're at least twice the size of the ones at the airship station with thin torsos and long limbs.

"What did you do?" I whisper, almost incapable of finishing the sentence.

All of a sudden, I feel a familiar cold pressure. Roemithia's trait, like she's trying to get back in my head. Can she do that at such a distance and in her Warlord no less? I don't have time to think about it. A pair of bullets fire at me from both Warlords. I plummet towards the maze, soaring through the flames. The bullets bury themselves into the dirt, leaving craters the size of my fist.

Using the smoke from the flames as a shield, I circle around the Warlords to come from behind. My axe buries itself into the back of one's neck, dragging forward to create a long diagonal slash. The Warlord howls as if it's in real pain. When I rip my axe away, tearing a sheet of metal with me, the muscle beneath oozes gray liquid. That blood darkens black and hardens. The metal isn't even metal. It's part of the creature. What the hell are these things?!

Roemithia pivots. She hits me like she's swatting a bug. I fly through the air, almost running into Maxwell's clawed mechanical hands. I didn't see his Warlord move, and yet, he's already by my side. The Warlord tries to crush me. I slip through its fingers before it tightens. Barreling skyward, I send my fist encapsulated by layers of divinity into his jaw to create a sizable crater. The Warlord screeches.

Roemithia flies towards me. Their ships don't make a sound even when flying faster than any airship I've ever seen. I can barely escape. She fires bomb after bomb that I burst with a few fireballs. The pressure from the blasts nearly sent me hurtling to the ground.

When she almost gains on me, I summon a storm of lightning that rips through the haul. Roemithia and the beast howl, hovering mid air as the lightning shocks them. Then the lightning dissipates. Roemithia drops. The Warlord slams into the maze below, consumed by the flames, although I doubt that was enough to take them out.

Maxwell returns, his Warlord whipping towards me with at least two dozen souls following. They screech like nails on a chalkboard, broken cries of anguish. They reach me before he does. I swing my axe at them, which isn't as useful as the real thing. My real axe was blessed by the church. It could disperse a spirit with a mere touch of the blade. My magic, however, has to deal more damage. The souls tear at my armor trying to keep me in place as Maxwell fires on us. Bullets ricochet off the armor that begins to crack, more and more as the souls tear at me.

I curl in on myself, summoning more and more divinity until the power swirls painfully within me. As if I'm holding the sun within my chest. Then I release the energy all in a single moment. The souls shriek, dispersing into the sky. The light slices Maxwell's Warlord in half. The beast lets out a pathetic cry as both fall from the sky to join Roemithia below. But I'm not a fool to expect them to stay down. I don't know what else these Warlords are capable of.

Hovering above the burning maze, I reach towards it to grow the flames even higher. They swirl into a vortex, a flaming tornado of heat and power. Sweat trickling from my brow, I twist and pull over and over and over until the melted hand of a Warlord bursts out. The talons nearly grab me, managing to chip at my armor and cut my arm. The beast bursts forth from the flames, all red muscle save for a viewing window in its forehead where I spot Roemithia fuming.

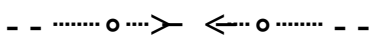
A gun breaks forth from the Warlord's back, almost as massive as its head. An eerie blue light forms and hums as the weapon charges up. I prepare an attack to blast the gun when a strange burst from below stops us. I feel my divinity slip away. Even the Warlord's machinery stops. Roemithia falls to the ground once more. The roaring tornado dissipates. I plummet through the air, somehow incapable of calling my magic. Before I hit the ground,

someone grabs me. A familiar scent and vibrant blue eyes that gaze upon me in a mixture of concern and disbelief.

"Lore," I whisper, grasping his arms that settle me atop the scorched earth.

"Let me do the talking," Lore says.

Through the dispersing flames and rising smoke, I see Maxwell's Warlord as a bloody heap on the ground to my right. He's limping with his arm around an unfamiliar vampire. On my left, Roemithia angrily slashes at her Warlord like it's at fault. Then, looking ahead, I see a man stomping towards us; Morren Valyork.



I'm not the greatest at action scenes and this one was tougher than usual with a mixture of magic and machinery. I hope it was at least somewhat understandable lol Seren's such a bad ass! I'm glad to show off more of his moves since he was in the open and didn't have as much to worry about. But what's going to happen now after there has been such a big fight? What will Valyork do?

75. Not Alone Anymore

"Your Majesty." Lore bows at Valyork.

Roemithia takes more after her father, almost a spitting image. Valyork has the same deep red hair and vibrant gold eyes. He towers over everyone, casting a shadow as if it were enough to warrant him king. He steps towards us, long and careful strides that do not show how furious he really is. His expression, however, does. A harsh snarl that twists his face in an unflattering way.

"What does the church think it's doing by sending you to wreak havoc upon my home?" Valyork growls, gesturing at the destruction. The vast maze has been completely destroyed. The windows of the ballroom lay shattered. Every nearby building has been seared and stained by ash.

I notice a man standing behind him, Trolley. Was it him who let off that blast that somehow took away my magic? It's back now. I feel it flowing through me, but for a solid minute, it was gone. I've never heard of a vampire with that sort of trait. It's troublesome. And I know Valyork isn't the one to have done it. Everyone knows his trait; telekinesis, which is equally as troubling and probably why he has remained in power even after the war.

"I invite you here in hopes to have a discussion, but this is the thanks I get?" Valyork continues, red in the face. "I should have known one of your kind couldn't keep themselves out of trouble. I should have suspected this was that damn churches' attempt to ruin me."

His eyes take on an almost maddening glint. "Were you sent to sabotage us? Destroy our Warlords? Study them? Study us? Steal us away from our world? It doesn't matter!" He suddenly waves his hands dramatically. "You've attacked my children and destroyed my home. I will have you killed for this!"

I meet Valyork's glare, stepping closer to give him a piece of my mind. To shout in his pathetic face that his daughter was the one who started this when she dared to invade my mind.

Lore presses a hand to my chest, keeping me in place. "Now, now, Your Majesty, let's take a breath. It was not the Holy Church's idea to send Seren. He came with me and I am responsible for him. I take full responsibility for what happened this evening, just like I am taking my responsibility now to inform you that killing a paladin of the Holy Church is not a smart decision," he says, maintaining a careful smile. "Seren was merely defending himself, weren't you?"

"Yes," I hiss, trying not to think of what Roemithia made me relive.

"A convenient excuse," Valyork argues. He starts to pace like a rabid animal. "This was a trick from the start, wasn't it? A way to test us..." His following words begin to jumble together, softly spoken and too convoluted to make sense.

"Then bring a Truth Sayer," Lore suggests even with Valyork having stumbled into a mad rant. The king stops in his tracks, his eyes fixated on Lore. "I know you must have a few, someone who can see who attacked first."

Valyork's gaze drifts to Roemithia. She has moved away from her Warlord, now standing on the sidelines. She clutches her injured arm. Blood soaks her skintight suit that I don't know when she changed into it. Her burning gaze looks at me, then she turns that attention to Valyork.

"Are you going to let him disrespect us like this?" Roemithia asks. She glances towards the crowd reforming in the ballroom. "Like you let them disrespect us during the war and all the years after."

She wanted this fight. She wanted to show that Valyork wouldn't harm me even after what happened. Something tells me, no matter how this scenario ends, she has won. At least that's what I thought until Valyork outstretched his hand. One twitch of his fingers and Roemithia screams. Her uninjured arm is torn clean off, as if she were made of paper. Roemithia falls to the

ground clutching the bloody stub. Her arm continues to twitch nearby. Maxwell comes to her aid, grabbing her detached limb and glaring at Valyork.

"You had strict orders not to start any trouble," Valyork growls. "If you speak again without permission, I will tear you apart piece by piece until nothing remains."

Maxwell grasps Roemithia's shoulders. She bites back a whimper when he guides her to her feet. They bow their heads respectfully, then leave. Valyork turns his back to them, focusing on me and thus missing the sly smirk Roemithia sends over her shoulder.

"Well, I for one believe it's in everyone's best interest to pretend this incident never happened," Lore says. "An attack upon a paladin of the Holy Church goes against the treaty. The church may defend itself and I don't think any of us wants that to happen."

Especially when I doubt Valyork wanted someone from the church to see the new Warlords. He won't attack until they're ready, although I imagine they will be. Soon.

Valyork remains quiet for a moment that feels like an eternity. Everyone waits with bated breath. Dare I say it, a few vampires fingers start to twitch, like they're waiting for the moment to call upon their Warlords to fight.

"Fine." Valyork snarls, waving his hand haphazardly at us. "Leave my home. I do not want to see or hear of trouble from either of you during the remainder of your stay. And inform the church that we will not be accepting any more of their kind in Vexsis until they offer an apology for their paladin's rude behavior."

"As you wish, Your Majesty." Lore bows again. Then he grasps my arm, guiding us through the rubble towards the road where our car already waits.

I throw open the door and slip inside. Lore follows. His arm brushes against mine. It sends a shiver down my spine and not in a good way. Now that the fight has ended and my mind settles, I can't stop thinking about what

Roemithia showed me. The death of my family, the training at Trinia, that twisted man who enjoyed death, and Priest Aja--I feel sick.

I can never deny the truth. The ones I called family were truly terrible. They hurt me in ways I could never imagine, in ways I didn't want to admit to because then I'd be a victim. Just another victim of another crime and my own stupidity. I followed them. I blindly followed them because I was too scared to be alone, then too terrified to admit to what I became.

"Seren," Lore whispers, resting a hand on my shoulder. I swat him away. His surprised expression hurts to see. I press myself into the opposite side of the car, desperate to put space between us.

"Sorry for the trouble," I mumble under my breath. "I think I should stay at the estate until you're done from here on out."

Lore hesitates to reply, "If you think that is best."

We sit in silence for the remainder of the drive. At the estate, I hurry out of the vehicle and into the front door. Cyan comes running down the hall shouting about sharing the details. I brush by him and a confused Draven, throwing open my bedroom door. The suit Lore got me is a tattered mess smelling of ash. I tear it off me, scratching at my skin as I head for the bathroom. Even the searing heat of a shower can't take away this crawling sensation, these memories of Priest Aja's hands all over me. I scratch and scratch, wishing to feel the pain of raw skin rather than those tainted memories.

Stupid. Fool. Idiot. You knew what happened. You knew and you pretended it wasn't real because you were a coward. Too scared to stand up for yourself. Too scared to face the memories. Too scared to face what you are.

"Seren!" Lore calls. The bathroom door rattles. "Stop whatever you're doing. I can smell the blood from out here."

"Of course you can, I got cut--" I stop short when I notice my hand gripping the shower curtain. Blood stains my nails. Fresh blood drips down the

curtain. I look at the tub where blood circles the drain. Then at my arms and chest where hundreds of red marks have ravaged my skin.

"I'm... I'm fine. Everything is fine. We can talk in the morning," I say, pressing a hand to my chest. These cuts are easy enough to heal. They vanish with a few words.

"I'm not leaving," Lore argues.

"I'm not letting you in. You'll probably try to get into the shower with me."

"I definitely would, but not for the reasons you're thinking. If I smell more blood, I'm kicking the door down."

And here I thought he'd throw a joke around, but he's bothered enough to be serious. That's unexpected.

I ease off the heat of the shower. The water starts to run clear. I sense Lore waiting in my room. I thought I wanted to be alone. Now, I realize I'd fall apart if I were truly alone. Just knowing Lore is out there waiting gives me a sense of ease. Like the air is easier to breathe.

I step out of the shower and run my hand across the fogged mirror. A coward stares back at me, eyes rimmed red. When I blink, I swear I see Priest Aja behind me. A looming dark figure with taloned fingers resting on my shoulders. His ragged breath brushes against my ear. I rush out of the bathroom to run into Lore. Lore grasps my shoulders, keeping me in place. "Let me see," he says, concern laced in his words.

I shiver when his fingers gently push aside my robe to inspect my neck and shoulders for injuries. "I have a few scratches. They're healed up now."

"I wish you didn't have to heal them at all. Why did you," He stops himself, sighing. "Whatever Roemithia showed you, know that she can warp your memories. She makes them worse."

"She didn't need to make mine worse," I hiss through clenched teeth. Brushing Lore's hands aside, I step around him to pace in the room. "She

knew that too. What she saw was enough and I should have realized long ago that what happened to me, what's happening to others, is the horrific nightmare that she truly showed me tonight. I was a fool to ever believe them. You were always right."

"Seren--"

"Don't!" I hold out my hand, telling him not to step closer. Lore frowns. "I don't need your pity right now. I don't want it! I don't deserve it because Roemithia was right. I didn't want to see the church for what it was because then I'd have to admit that I'm some sick fucking murderer. A psychopath who... who enjoyed what he did and was too much of a coward to see what others had done to him. I didn't want to be the victim, but by doing so I became the murderer and if I step away from that I'm a victim again. A weak, pathetic, cowardly--"

"Stop." Lore pulls me into a tight embrace. I grip his back, unclear on what I want to do. Run. Hide. Hold on forever. "Roemithia got into your head. That's what she does," he whispers.

"But she was right."

Lore presses his lips against my temple. I melt into his embrace, proving that I do want him here. Even as I lose myself, I want Lore here.

"She wasn't because she saw what fit her story. You are a survivor, Seren. A survivor of true horrors that so many could never begin to comprehend. You're strong to have made it so far and to see the truth when many others before you never did."

"Cyan did, long before me."

"Because he had someone by his side who showed him and an opportunity to safely run away," Lore argues. He pulls away to gaze down at me, a solemn look in his eyes. "You had no one but those who kept forcing the same ideas."

"Until I met you."

"I suppose I will take a bit of credit." His soft chuckle makes me smile, even if it's only brief. Lore leans in to rest his forehead against mine. His warmth seeps through my robes. I could stay like this all night. I want to, but I also want to know...

"You aren't asking," I say. "You aren't asking what she showed me."

I don't know if I can tell even if he did. I don't know if I can utter any of it out loud without breaking even more.

"I don't need to ask," he replies, hesitating to add. "Because I think I already know. I know what it's like to want to crawl out of your own skin after..."

He doesn't need to finish. As I look into his eyes, I see the same expression I had in the bathroom mirror.

"You said you were a murderer, that you enjoyed hurting those who took something from you," he says, voice lowering until he whispers. "I'm no different. I enjoyed killing the Seymours."

Words lodge in my throat. I can't think of what to say. I grip him tighter, feeling the sudden tension in his shoulders. When he steps away, a chill washes over me. I clench my hands at my sides, watching him head over to the window. He leans against the wall to gaze into the night. When he speaks, he sounds a thousand miles away.

"Monroe Seymour was an annoying and cruel bastard. He was a stern believer in corporal punishment, only towards me, of course. The charity case had to do well, had to obey, and had to entertain his guests from time to time." He spat out the word entertain with a hatred I've never heard in his voice before. "Graeda Seymour never missed an opportunity to berate me. If my suit had a single wrinkle or my tie was a little crooked, she'd beat me senseless. I hated them, but what I hated more was how amazingly kind they were to their real children. I hated that they weren't like that to me. Back then, I believed that was my fault."

"Leymin didn't care about anyone but herself. She liked having me around for this." Lore taps his fangs. "Blight on tap. She and her friends would mix

it with whatever else they were doing. I never said no because, from time to time, they'd let me join the party. I felt a bit normal, even if they laughed and teased me. Leymin knew what was happening to me, often witnessed the abuse, but she never did anything to stop it. Not even when she discovered what our dear older brother was doing with me late at night either."

My breath catches in my throat. I see Lore's reflection in the glass. His eyes shimmer a deep, frightening blue. His fangs press over his lips, like he's incapable of containing them. His nails pierce the molding around the window, almost tearing it from the wall.

"Belroe, he... he ignored me at first. Then he was kind, so unbelievably kind that I followed him and did whatever he asked. When he'd invite me to his room and make me undress, I did it because he'd tell me the sweetest things. Things I've never heard before, and it was everything I wish I had, but he was obsessed and jealous. When one of Monroe's business partners wanted their turn, Belroe would get furious with me, like I was the one seducing them. I begged for forgiveness, even when he hurt me so bad I thought he was going to kill me."

Lore runs a hand over his neck. It rests there for a long moment before he turns to face me, an almost mad look in his eyes. "Then my trait revealed itself on the night I was sure he would kill me, but it was Belroe who didn't survive. I had never felt so alive. Never been so unbelievably happy. I realized I could not bear to let any of them live. They would never see justice, so I became my own justice. I killed them off one by one and took everything they ever built. Even after death, I continue to hurt them."

Lore approaches me. I don't know what to do, what to think, or what to say. My mind's buzzing from his words, his terrifying admission. He rests his hands on my cheek. Every word he whispers against my lips, "If you're a monster, then so am I, and I don't wish to be anything else. Do you?"

I don't know. Everything happened too fast. I've yet to catch my breath, to feel the very ground beneath my feet. The world has become a haze, lies and revelations that I've never imagined. How am I meant to unpack this? To understand all that has been done? I can't think. I don't really want to.

I've constantly been tugged back and forth so much these last few weeks. For once, even if it's only for tonight, I don't want to think about anything. I just want to be here with Lore and feel like I'm not the maddest person in the room. It's fucked, but I like knowing that we've both got our demons. That they're deep, dark secrets that would scare off many, but we're here. Together. So I nod and lean in for what I desperately want; a kiss.

I grasp Lore's waist, pulling him flush against me. He kisses me hard, twisting his fingers into my hair. That's all it takes to remove the weight from my shoulders. It's somehow easier to breathe with Lore kissing me. His touch and his scent and his heat, it's all I need to make me numb to everything else. Damn the past. I want to focus on the present, on this blissful moment that I want to believe I deserve. After all this horror, am I not allowed to grasp onto the one good thing I've finally managed to find?

When Lore rests his forehead against mine, I realize that there's no more guilt. Even after what Lore admitted, I don't care what anyone thinks of us. Especially not the church.

"I don't want to go back," I say, looking into his eyes. "To the church. I can't. I need to figure out who I am without them. I need to work all this out and... and I want to be with you while I do that. Is that okay?"

He breaks into a smile that makes me want to kiss him again, and so much more. But I keep it back to hear his response, said after a soft chuckle, "Of course it's okay. I wouldn't want it any other way."

"I'm sorry about the Seymour family, what they did to you--Lore, I... I'm sorry that I ever thought you just killed them in cold blood."

"That's not something you need to apologize for, but I do appreciate the notion." Lore's thumbs caress my cheeks, warming them even more. "I'm sorry that both of us had to go through all this, but we're together now. We don't have to go through anything alone anymore, right?"

"Right," I whisper. Then we're kissing again. Somehow, I've never felt so complete.

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So much progress has been made in the last ten or so chapters. Seren has officially said it; he doesn't want to go back to the church. Lore has admitted to killing the Seymour family, who abused him terribly. Both our boys have rather dark pasts, but they've found some happiness in each other. What are your thoughts concerning these pasts? What Lore has done, how he has acted up to this point, and the future for these two?

76. Everything He Ever Wanted

Warning: Mature content. Please keep comments respectful. Reminder for those who somehow skipped this at the start, DO NOT refer to my characters as sex positions; top, bottom, uke, seme etc. They have names, fucking use them, and none of that "omg low key gross/weird that so-and-so is a bottom." You will be muted. Immediately.

Tonight has been intense, although the events pale to this moment. Lore kisses me passionately. One hand twists into my hair. The other pushes the robe from my shoulders. Is this the first time I don't hesitate? I'm already releasing his waist, allowing the fabric to drift to the floor. It feels like an eternity since I last felt so sure of anything. At this moment, through all that has happened, I somehow know exactly what I want. And what I want is Lore.

He bites my bottom lip when I tear at his shirt. The buttons pop off. I'd feel bad because this suit was probably expensive, but money is the last thing on my mind. I want him so badly that I feel I've gone mad. Lore moans from the pressure of my lips against his neck. I tug impatiently at his jacket. He releases me to slip out of the useless garments, allowing my hands to feel every piece of newly exposed skin. I don't know if his body is hot or my hands are cold. It's too much, fire scorching through my veins to make every nerve tingle. I wish to feel every piece of him, learn what he likes, what he craves, what makes him moan, and how his body feels against mine.

The room's searing hot. I can't hear anything other than our labored breaths and Lore's quiet curse when my fingers brush over his chest. There's pleasure and desire, so much of it bundled up inside me that's been waiting to burst. There's no point denying that I've wanted this for a while. Maybe since the day I saw him. I knew he was beautiful and didn't want to admit it because he was a dhampir and I was a paladin. There wasn't meant to be attraction, but it was always there, lingering in the back of my mind waiting

for the moment when I gave in. Now that I have, now that Lore's in my grasp, I can't stop.

Lore curses in surprise when I grab his ass to lift him. His legs immediately wrap around my waist. A quiet moan tickles my ear when I kiss his chest over and over, moving us towards the bed. I might have forgotten his legs were around my waist when I dropped him, so I fell into his chest. We both release a quiet chuckle, muffled by Lore crashing our lips together again. His hands move over my arm, feeling every scar. He hesitates at a particularly bad one over my chest. I freeze above him, unsure of what to say. His finger dances over the expanse of the long scar reaching from my shoulder to the middle of my chest. This isn't like before on the airship. That was the spur of the moment, quick and desperate. We didn't have time to truly see each other, or maybe I'm viewing this differently because I can't imagine us stopping here. I want more. I want everything. I want him.

His eyes meet mine. I fear what he'll say, which is strange for me. I've never really cared what someone thought of the scars before. They were a part of me, but now, like this, I worry that he won't... that he'll hate me somehow. He knows some of these scars are from killing vampires and dhampir, like him. I suddenly can't breathe.

But then Lore cups my cheeks, surprising me with a quick kiss to my lips. He moves to kiss the scar and another and another, somehow making everything so intimate that my toes curl like I'm a damn kid getting his first kiss. How is he making me feel giddy right now? It's maddening.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Kissing you," he replies, returning to my lips. We kiss languidly, like we have all the time in the world. I hope we do.

I press my forehead against his after. "Kissing my scars, you mean."

"Ah, yes, I was making a few wishes." Lore wraps his arms around my shoulders, pulling our bodies flush together.

"What were those wishes?"

He smirks. "That whoever put those on you would one day end up before me so I could ensure that it'd never happen again. For the betterment of society, of course."

"Of course." I laugh, kissing him after. "You're strange, Lore."

"I do believe I called you strange first, however, I am open to sharing that title so long as it's with you."

"I'm honored."

"As you should be." His hands move down my back, lower and lower until he grasps my ass. "I am very popular, after all."

"Don't remind me," I growl, feeling a little stupid for doing so.

"Oh?" Lore hums, moving his body against mine. The heat from earlier returns. I kiss his neck, pressing firmly against him. Our hips become fast friends, grinding desperately. Pleasure courses through me, intense and overwhelming.

"Somebody is still jealous," Lore whispers against my ear. I bite his neck in retaliation. He moans and thrusts his hips against me. The fabric between us has to go. I want to feel every inch of him.

I retreat, standing along the edge of the bed between Lore's thighs. He lifts his hips, as eager to get his pants off as I am. I don't think I'll ever get tired of seeing him like this, flushed and disheveled. Lore's always been so prim and proper, wearing the finest suits with his hair perfectly combed. He always knows what to say, when he should say it, he's so freakishly composed and I want to shatter it. I want to make him a mess.

Dropping my underwear, I kick them aside to crawl back between Lore's thighs. His bare skin against mine sets me ablaze. I want him like I've never wanted anyone or anything before. I've heard stories of moments like this, a scorching touch, an intense kiss, but I don't think any actually describes this. No words can encompass a moment that transcends all we've ever

known. The feeling of Lore's lips against mine, his hair held tightly between my fingers, our bodies pressed together as if we were built for each other.

Grasping his thigh, I rub my hips roughly against his, grinding him into the bed. Lore groans. His hands cling to my back, nails pressing crescent shapes into the skin. I thrust harder against him, tugging on his hair that makes his body break out with goosebumps. My hand caresses the skin of his strong thighs to his toned stomach. He trembles under my touch. Then I kiss his neck, desperate to keep the marks there, wishing to prove he's mine and this moment is real.

He moans when my thumb brushes his nipple. My fingers tweak the nub, pressing my hand against his chest when he leans into the touch. His moans grow louder as I abuse his neck, moving down to take his nipple between my teeth. Lore presses his hips against my stomach, rubbing his arousal against me. His fingers twist into my hair, pulling tight when something feels too good. I relish in it, licking his perked nipples again and again until he whimpers my name. Moving down his body, I kiss the sweat from his heaving chest, lingering for a long moment on his shaking hips before I realize where my hand is going. My fingers rest against his entrance. I don't even know if we have any lube in here. I look up at Lore. He takes a long breath as I've finally given him a moment to rest. His lust filled eyes gaze down at me, hands twisted into the sheets beside him.

"Don't stop," he says and has the audacity to spread his legs wider, an invitation.

Well, I definitely can't now.

I grip the base of his cock, moving my hand slowly. His thighs quiver, then he cries out when my lips move over his arousal. This isn't like the airship either. I take my time sucking him off, enjoying Lore's pleasure and what's to come. My other arm keeps his hips locked to the bed. His body quivers beneath me, low moans echoing around me as I pleasure him. He whimpers when my mouth stops its ministrations. But my hand continues to pump his shaft, making Lore writhe against the bed. I lean over him, groaning when he returns the favor by grabbing my erection. The first real attention all night has me pathetically thrusting into his hand. Lore tosses an arm over

my shoulder to bring me closer. Our lips clash, messily kissing as we pleasure each other, but I don't want to stop here tonight.

"Is it okay if I take the lead?" I ask. Lore wraps his legs around my waist. I grunt when our bodies glide against one another, so overheated that I already feel ready to burst.

"My sweet Seren," he whispers against my lips. "You can do anything you want with me."

"Don't say something you might regret later."

"Oh, why? Will you punish me?" Lore bites my lip. "Because I highly doubt I will ever regret that."

I shiver at the implications, mind already reeling of all that might entail. Between marking his neck, I hungrily ask, "Where's the lube?"

"How do you know there's any in here? This is your room, not mine." He whimpers when I grasp his thigh, pushing his leg up so I can grind against his backside.

"Because it's you and I'm sure you were hoping we'd use it at some point."

"It's insanely hot that you know me so well." He points towards the bedside table. "In there."

I kiss him again because, for some reason, I find that cute. How hard have I fallen?

While I head for the bedside table, Lore moves up the bed. He makes a comfortable place with the pillows to lay on. I slip back between his legs, groaning from the heat of our bodies reigniting. Lore spreads his legs wide, groaning when I start to jerk him off again. I watch him come undone, eyes overcome by lust and hips thrusting pathetically into my grasp. Another low moan passes his lips when I press my finger against his entrance. I squirm my finger past his rim, thrusting slowly. Then I insert another finger and stretch. Lore throws back his head, cursing. Another follows when I move

in to take his nipple between my teeth, abusing his chest so he's covered in kiss marks. My fingers thrust ruthlessly into his heat, then curl to make his body spasm. A third finger joins. Lore's hands tear into the pillows behind him. His nails rip the covers. Sweat trickles down his chest. I lick the stray beads of sweat from his neck, moving up to take his lips. My fingers continue thrusting until his hips are bucking back to meet them.

"I'm ready. I'm so fucking ready, Seren," he moans against my ear. I don't think I could deny Lore this moment even if hellfire was raining upon us. He grabs my chin, pressing his lips against mine hungrily. Our tongues move together, lapping at the other's mouth. When he breaks away, he grips the pillow making his knuckles redden from the tension.

My hands are shaking for some reason. Nerves ripple through me, accompanied by pleasure and excitement. Kneeling, I grab Lore's legs, spreading them and enjoying the amazing view. His hair's stuck to his glistening skin. A beautiful blush rests beneath his hungry eyes, tongue coming out to run over his bottom lip. His arousal drips between his legs, stomach heaving as he prepares himself for me. When I press my tip to his entrance, he releases a quiet gasp, then a low groan as I push into his heat. My hips ache to move, to thrust mercilessly. My fingers press crescent marks into his pale thighs, preventing me from going too fast. I want him to enjoy this. I want to hear him moan my name. I want to give him everything. I want this moment to last forever. And I fear I won't be able to do that when my senses are firing off so rapidly that I can't keep up.

Lore's body moves and twists, adjusting to my size. He heaves a long breath, eyes fluttering closed while his hips start to rub against me. It's too much. I can barely stand the pure ecstasy Lore's giving me. Pleasure ripples through every part of me, every bit of it coiling in the pit of my stomach. Then he nods and I lose any sense of self control. Lore's cries grow in intensity the faster I thrust into his enticing embrace, encouraging me to thrust harder. More and more until he's ripping into the pillow, moans continuously desperate. His back arches off the bed, hips pushing back into my powerful thrusts.

I can't think. My hips are on autopilot, moving desperately inside him. All I can hear are his high moans and the sound of our sex. He's intoxicating,

more than I ever thought possible. He moves to grab his own base, pumping his arousal in tune with my thrusts. The sight of Lore an erotic mess, crying my name as I pound him into the bed doesn't feel real, like I've entered a dream that I never wish to wake from. The pleasure rippling through me, white lining my vision, is so intense that I can't breathe.

"Harder," Lore gasps. "Harder, Seren!"

Gripping his hips, I pull out only to slam back in, making him release a surprised scream. I repeat the action, thrusting as roughly as I can to hear Lore cry out again and that's what causes him to break, back arching off the bed from the orgasm sending him into a trembling mess. He tightens around me, suffocating me until I can't take it anymore. My orgasm hits me, sending my hips into erratic movements until my body goes limp. I've never had one so intense, one that left me so exhausted afterwards.

I rest on top of him, kissing Lore's neck. He twists his fingers into my hair. Our lips crash together, continuing to bask in one another during the afterglow. Somehow, I still haven't had enough, moving my hands over his shivering thighs to his still heaving chest then slipping my fingers into his tangled hair.

When I roll off of him, all I can hear are our labored breaths. Lore's skin sticks against mine. The room's humid. We both definitely need a shower but I'm too tired to move.

"I am infuriated that it took us this long to have sex," Lore says, making me laugh.

I look towards him. His eyes are closed, hands laying at his side as he continues to catch his breath. I move to my side, leaning in to brush the hair from his flushed face. His eyes flutter open, such an intense blue that the ocean would be jealous.

"Since we did wait this long, I guess we'll have to make up for all the missed opportunities," I say, grinning at Lore's exaggerated shell-shocked expression.

"I really like flirtatious Seren," he says, grabbing my arm to pull me into him. He catches my lips, kissing me slowly. It's as exciting as all the others. I don't know how. Lore has that effect, somehow maddening and comforting all at once.

"Don't get used to him," I say against his lips. "I don't want to spoil you too much."

"Why not?" Lore whines, wrapping his arms around my waist. He nuzzles his nose into my neck, tickling me. "Spoil me rotten, please. We've both been so deprived of affection. We have to make up for that too."

"Are you really trying to play the traumatized childhood card right now to get what you want?"

"Is it working?" He asks. I bite back a smile that Lore forces to come out anyway when he says, "It's absolutely working."

"Shut up." Pushing away, I step out of bed. Looking back at Lore, I catch the brief moment of concern in his eyes before he forces a smile. Is he worrying I'm going to panic again or ask him to leave? It makes me think of our time on the airship when he said; *We're just the ones you all fuck in secrecy.*

"Not the cuddling type?" He asks, pretending that he isn't worried. He snaps his fingers. "Ah, do you like to smoke after sex? I never took you as the smoking type. It's gross, but I can deal with it."

"No, we need a shower," I say, taking his hand. Lore's false smile falls, replaced with a genuine one. I tug him out of bed. He stumbles into my arms. "We'll cuddle after the shower... and changing the sheets."

Lore runs his hands over my arms, squeezing my biceps with a lecherous grin. "That might be a bit of a waste, seeing as I think we'll dirty them again before morning."

Uh... that... well... that is a strong possibility that I refuse to acknowledge, so I distract Lore instead. He curses when I lift him bridal style. His arms

wrap around my neck, staring at me wide-eyed and slack jawed.

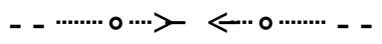
"You said to spoil you," I remind him, walking towards the bathroom.

With the most serious voice I may have ever heard him use, Lore says, "I'm sucking you off in the shower."

"I... can you be sweet for five seconds?"

"I'm sucking you off romantically in the shower?"

What have I gotten myself into...



What a chapter for me to advertise on lol Hello, hello friends! To those who are new, I have a story called Speak the Truth that, for the last few years, has only been available on tapas. Recently I've been working to get it on amazon and now all three volumes are available as eBooks and paperbacks. This is an enemies to lovers story where a prince falls for his arch nemesis while at school. They have to face a lot of societal and political expectations, always navigating their own issues while coming to grow as individuals and as a couple. You can grab the complete series all together or purchase the book you might not have yet. Go to amazon and search for Speak the Truth Volume One, Two, or Three Twoony and it'll pop up if it's available in your country. I've also left an external link for volume one, which I think only works on mobile.

Anywho, and there we have it, our boys have officially done the deed and had some kind of cute cuddling time afterwards. As if Lore could let that last. He always has to say something dirty, but we wouldn't want him any other way! How is this going to change their relationship? Will Seren be able to openly express his affections for Lore or are they going to end up hiding what's going on behind closed doors?

77. A New Foundation

I slept better than I ever have. No doubt being caused by who I wake up to. Lore sleeps comfortably beside me. Our legs are entangled beneath the blankets, bodies pressed firmly together. His arm rests over my waist. Mine lay between us. My fingers strain themselves not to gently rub the bare skin of his chest. I don't want to wake him. Our foreheads brush from sharing the same pillow. The blanket is warm, but I dare not move. His hair tickles my nose, then his fingers twitch. He grasps my waist, humming as he presses closer to me. I bite back a chuckle, and a sneeze because now his hair's in my face.

Don't sneeze. Don't sneeze. Don't--

I barely hold back the sneeze, but it wakes Lore anyway. His wide blue eyes flutter open, distant at first, like he's confused to find me here. Then he smiles.

"Good morning," he whispers, voice raspy and deep, which is incredibly hot.

"Morning." I brush the hair out of his face, tucking it behind his ear.

Half asleep, Lore hums, "How did you sleep?"

"Better than I thought I would."

"So did I." He rubs my back. "I wouldn't mind if we made this our new morning routine."

"Me neither."

Lore holds me tight. I snuggle into his neck, kissing the skin that breaks out with goosebumps. I've rarely had functioning relationships due to the church. Always coming and going, traveling to other cities, looking over my shoulder for the next attack and having a life that was never worth

discussing. Others found the tales of my life frightening or unsettling. I'd meet a guy and things would be great at first, then the relationship would come to a crashing halt when I left town for a month, then another and another. Eventually, they got fed up with me. Or we'd sit at the dinner table where he'd tell me about his day, his interests, and I'd have nothing to say. I never really had interests. I never had a life outside the Holy Church, but now I can. Being like this with Lore can become my normal. The thought makes my heart race and ache all at once. Well, as normal as we can be.

A dhampir and a paladin. Even if I renounce my title, it doesn't change what I've done.

Oh Mother's, what of the children? When we return, if we act like... like a couple, what will they say? What will they think? I don't want to make them feel uncomfortable or strange or--damn it--I don't know.

"Breakfast should be ready soon," Lore says, bringing my attention back to him. He glances over his shoulder at the sunlight coming through the window. Sitting up, Lore stretches his arms high above his head. My gaze strays to his chest, admiring the body I've come to know but continue wishing to learn even more about. My attention doesn't go unnoticed. Smiling, Lore leans in to kiss my neck, whispering against my heated skin, "We should hold off on round three until after breakfast."

"Aren't you going to the factory today?" I ask rather than think about round three otherwise we won't make it to breakfast.

"Avoiding the topic? And here I thought you meant it when you said we were going to make up for missed opportunities."

"I never said we wouldn't, but if you want to wait until after breakfast then I suggest we do avoid the topic." I surprise myself by making Lore successfully blush. Seems that he likes flirtatious Seren but hasn't gotten used to him yet. It's not like I don't or can't flirt, but with Lore it has always been different. I don't want it to be anymore and that's going to take some time for the both of us, I think.

Clearing his throat, Lore disappears into the bathroom. "Are you still planning to stay here while I'm gone?"

"Yeah. That'd be for the best." Rising from the bed, I follow Lore into the bathroom. He hesitates at the sink. He has realized we're in my room. His toothbrush isn't here, if that's what he was going for.

"We didn't get to talk about what Valyork discussed with you," I say. "Was it about the mine?"

"Yes, and no."

I lean against the entryway, staring incredulously at him. Lore grabs a hairbrush to at least deal with his hair. I'd argue he looks good either way, then again, I'm now learning that I really like it when he pulls his hair up. Makes me want to kiss his neck, which I will refrain from doing because I am an adult with impulse control.

"We talked about the mine at first," he says, bringing my attention to his frowning reflection in the mirror. "If there was anything he could offer me to take ownership of it, the usual, but he didn't stop there. He made small talk, seemingly meaningless until he asked if I ever considered moving to Vexsis."

"Why would he ask that?"

"I wondered the same thing." Lore sets the brush aside, turning to face me. He leans against the sink, fingers tapping the countertop. "He asked what I thought about Rhamie and how things have been not only for me, but also other vampires and dhampir on earth. He was trying to be sly, pretending to care about them when I think he was trying to get information. Either about the capital or the state of things outside of it."

"He's planning something."

"Most likely. You saw those Warlords." Lore's eyes darken. I cross my arms. My fingers dig into the skin, recalling the fearsome weaponry. "Vampires

have been preparing for a long time, either to defend themselves or attack. Valyork has spies everywhere, but so do his children, his enemies."

"Asking you is like asking a neutral party."

"And speaking to you might have led to some discoveries as well. Sounds like it was his shot in the dark, but one he was willing to take."

"Which means he definitely isn't happy about how things turned out."

"Certainly not."

Speaking of last night reminds me of the decision I made to leave the church. When I took this job, I never imagined I'd be here. I never imagined ever that I'd leave the church and now--now I can't imagine returning. I couldn't live with myself if I did. However, is it right of me to leave without looking back? What I know now, how can I step away without doing anything?

"Seren," Lore calls, approaching me. The gentle touch of his hands against my arms surprises me. "What's wrong?"

I run a hand through my hair, heaving a long breath to steady my abrupt panicked breaths. "I suddenly thought about how there are others at the church, those like me and Cyan, who need help, who need a guiding hand to find their own path in life. I can't do that if I step away."

"Excuse my harshness, but you can't save everyone," he says, which *is* harsh. It's something I didn't want to hear.

"Maybe not, but I don't want to give up on everyone because I may be able to save at least someone."

"But you cannot put yourself in a position that will cause you so much harm that you're incapable of helping anyone," he argues. "Let's not think about this right now. Take some time to consider every option and know that I will help in whatever decision you come to."

A wave of emotion washes over me. One I don't quite understand. I can't put words to it other than grateful. So unbelievably grateful to know that Lore's beside me, no matter what. That he's supporting my decision. Maybe it's because I feel like I'm finding my footing again, a new foundation.

"Thank you," I say, leaning up to press a quick kiss to his cheek.

"I suppose it's okay that you missed, considering neither of us have brushed our teeth and nothing is worse than improper hygiene," he says, making me laugh. "But you're welcome."

Lore steps around me, announcing that he's going to change and head downstairs for breakfast. I do the same, staring at myself in the mirror for a long moment afterwards. Last night, I saw a coward. Today, I see a new man. Someone confused and uncertain, but better than he was yesterday. And hopefully he'll be even better tomorrow.

Heading downstairs, I find Lore already seated at the head of the table. I really like when he braids his hair, just a simple loose braid hanging over his shoulder with a few tufts framing his face. It makes his blue eyes even more prominent, like he's constantly casting a spell. Lore smiles at me, making my toes curl. Cyan brushes past me, yawning. Draven follows. The two take a seat. Before anyone gets suspicious as to why I'm standing stupidly in the doorway, I hurry to my spot too.

"What happened at the ball last night?" Cyan asks, shoving some food into his mouth. "The pungent paladin over there looked like he was battling a forest fire and lost, then you both disappeared. I know whatever happened was bad because those crusty crotch sniffers outside have been grumbling about being disrespected all night."

"How did you know what they were grumbling about?" Draven asks, eying Cyan skeptically.

"I was eavesdropping. Duh."

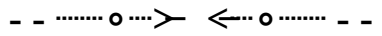
"Let's refrain from eavesdropping on them for the time being," Lore says. "Because last night was a debacle of epic proportions."

Lore proceeds to fill Cyan and Draven in on what transpired. Both occasionally gaze at me, seemingly surprised to hear that I tore two Warlords to pieces on my own. I sit a little taller, proud, then somewhat annoyed that they didn't think I could pull that off. At the end of the tale, Lore informs them that I won't be going to the mines with him. I doubt they like that. I'm interrupting Cyan and Draven time.

"Can I go with you then?" Cyan asks, practically levitating from the excitement.

"Perhaps tomorrow. I'd like to take today to allow things to calm down," Lore replies, offering Cyan a smile when he deflates like a popped balloon.

But then Cyan perks up. I'm not sure why. He's suddenly staring at me, similar to how he stared at the airships. That doesn't bode well, seeing as he wished to tear them apart. I'm about to ask why he's observing me like the mad scientist that he is when Lore starts speaking to Draven about a few work matters. Cyan turns his attention back to his food and I do the same, never quite sure why he was giving me that weird look.



Sorry that this is so late! I was with family today and just got home. Didn't expect to be gone this long and my phone was so wonky that I didn't want to even attempt uploading. Anywho, Seren's seriously considering renouncing his title as paladin. Of course Lore promises to be behind him every step of the way. Will these two be able to stand together and help those brainwashed by the church? And what could it be that got Cyan's attention?

78. Cyan's Past

Cyan P.O.V.

"Why are we hiding in the library?" Draven asks after breakfast. Even his judging eyes are attractive. How annoying.

"Because we need to talk about those hickey's on Seren's neck," I whisper, double checking the library doors to ensure we weren't followed. "You saw them too, didn't you?"

"I didn't need to. His Grace never returned to his room last night and he was with Seren this morning."

"What... why didn't you tell me?"

Draven twists his nose. "Do you want me to update you on His Grace's sex life?"

"No, just--this is really fast for them, don't you think? I mean, Seren's from the Holy Church." I start pacing past the shelves, nerves growing exponentially. "What if His Grace does have feelings for him, real ones?"

"That's none of our business," Draven says, making me huff.

"How can you say that? Lore has always protected us and cared for us. We need to do the same for him," I argue, pointing accusingly at the heartless bastard.

"He doesn't need our protection. Why are you getting worked up about this? Seren may be from the church, but you admitted he has been questioning himself lately."

"Yeah, but-but what if he was only making us believe that?" I ask, feeling those nerves overtake me. Sure, he looked jealous on the airship, but that didn't mean anything would really happen, especially not so soon! "What if

this has always been the plan? Send some paladin to trick His Grace, to hurt him in the worst of ways, and learn every little secret we have," I suggest, wringing my hands together.

"You're sounding extremely paranoid," Draven says, stepping over as if to grab my wrist, but he stops. "His Grace is capable of handling himself. I do not say that because I don't care, but because I truly believe it. If Seren worries you so much, go speak to him again before you do anything rash."

"I wasn't planning anything rash."

He smirks. "Not yet."

I bite my lip to stave off a grin. "It isn't rash if I put some thought into it."

"Even your plans aren't that thought out."

I scoff at his playful smirk. At least he made it obvious that he was joking.

"Why are you getting worked up about this now?" He asks. "We've both suspected something has been going since the airship, at least."

"I don't know," I answer, shrugging. "Before, it felt like Seren might have had some interest and maybe His Grace was messing with his head. Now with what happened, His Grace staying with him, even those matching suits, it feels like things are mutual and that's weird. It's worrisome. The church is... they know how to toy with people. They know how to break them and make them do terrible things. I've seen it with my own eyes. I want His Grace to find happiness, I really do, but I... this is..."

"I understand," Draven says, slowly nodding. That makes me feel a bit better.

"Sorry, I got worked up over nothing," I grumble. This time, Draven risks brushing his hand against my shoulder. The lightest touch that makes me shiver. I bite the inside of my cheek when he releases me, likely thinking my shiver was a bad sign.

"It's fine. The church is a sore spot for you. I stand by what I said, speak with Seren and see what he has to say. You have a knack for sniffing out bullshit," he says, then leaves to attend to his usual duties, which involves being an annoying perfectionist. He needs to ask for a vacation. Maybe we could go to the beach--not that I would go with him on vacation. That's ridiculous, and why would a vampire want to go to the beach? The sun can be super irritating. I'm a total dud head sometimes.

I wait in the library for Lore to leave for the mine. This gives me time to think over what I wish to say to Seren, or rather ask. After hearing Lore's departure, I wait a few more moments to search the estate for Seren. I find him in one of the lounge areas where a small desk rests by the window. He sits there, hunched over the desk. Stepping closer to peer around him, I barely make out a few words that send me barrelling across the room.

"Cyan!" Seren shouts too late. I've grabbed the paper, so fixated on those words that I can't think of anything else.

There, within some text that blurs in my eyes because it pales in comparison, are a few unbelievable words; *I am renouncing my title as paladin.*

"What is this?" I ask, hand shaking as I hold up the letter.

Seren shakes too. He rips the paper from my grasp to stash under his arm like I haven't already seen it. Mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, Seren doesn't speak save for a few half sputtered words that make no sense, so I speak instead, "Is it true? You're going to leave the church?"

I can't believe it. The mere thought feels as crazy as the Holy Mother's suddenly appearing before me in ethereal light to say I've been wrong all this time. Because the church digs and digs into a person the longer they're there. Had I been like Seren, had I stayed as long as he had, I don't think I could have left. I can't imagine anyone leaving and now, as he stares at me with a trembling gaze, I think the craziest thing I've ever imagined has actually become real.

"Are you really leaving?" I repeat.

"Yeah," he whispers, sounding as utterly shocked as I am to hear it.

I actually feel weak. I stumble over to the nearby couch where I drop onto the cushions with a soft thud. Seren joins me, clutching the incomplete letter. We sit in silence for a long moment before Seren says, "I don't know what to say."

"What?" I ask, tearing my gaze from the window I've now memorized.

Seren must have memorized his letter because he has yet to take his eyes off it. Even now, his gaze remains glued to the paper as he speaks, "I don't know what to write. Part of me wants to say horrible things, to curse them for everything they've ever done, but another merely wants this to be over with. Send a polite and professional letter renouncing my title so, if the day comes that I may be able to help others in the church, I could potentially still approach them. Does that make sense?"

He finally looks at me. The color has drained from his face. His eyes search mine for answers.

"Makes total sense to me. They're bastards who did terrible things. I've always wanted to tear them apart, so I get the desire to scream at them. I guess you just have to choose which one you think will be best in the long run?" I suggest, unsure of what else to say. I didn't have to renounce my title. I left the church at a young age and it was easy to adapt to the Seymour estate. Seren is leaving a huge part of his life behind. I don't think there is a right answer to what he should do.

"Will you help me write it?" he asks, puzzling me.

"Why me?"

"Because you're the only one who truly understands. Lore, he..." Seren bites back a smile that says so much. "He has a way with words, but he has never been part of the church. He has heard the horror stories, but he hasn't lived them. Not like you and I have." He suddenly rubs the back of his neck, frowning. "I understand if you don't want to. This mustn't bring up good memories."

"I wouldn't say it's bringing up bad ones either. I'm more shocked that you're actually leaving. It doesn't feel real."

He nods. "Yeah."

"I'll look over the letter, but if you're hoping that I can correct your grammar or spelling, I won't be any help there. It's better to ask Draven for that. He is a perfectionist after all."

Seren snorts. "The mad scientist understands complex chemistry but not grammar?"

"We've all gotta be good and bad at something."

He chuckles, heaving a long and unsteady breath. For a while longer, he sits by me. Then he takes slow steps back to the desk where he sits, shoulders tense and pen hovering above the page. I join him, leaning against the desk to read over what he says. That seems to encourage him to continue, occasionally glancing towards me with a silent question; *is this alright?*

I don't know either though. Seems he is going for the softer route, claiming that he has been struggling with his faith and does not find it appropriate to remain at the church. He hesitates to write that he *appreciates* what the church did for him. I see it now, the rage in his eyes that filled mine for a very long time. But he pushes through it, managing to finish the letter in a few more strokes.

"Done," he says, pushing the letter away as if that will make it disappear. Resting his elbows on the desk, Seren hides his face in his hands, taking more slow breaths that do little to ease the tension in his shoulders.

I'm not good at this comforting shit, but I try anyway. Seren gives me a lopsided smile when I awkwardly pat his back.

"No need to force yourself." He chuckles. "The fact that you're here is comforting enough."

"Good." I stop patting his back. It was weird as shit. "So, uh, are you going to hand that to them in person or...?"

He shakes his head. "I don't want to go back there. I'll... I'll send it from Lore's estate in the capital. They'll probably receive it on the day we return to Silra."

"You don't want to talk to Olere?"

Seren stares out the window, a sudden clearness to his eyes. He smiles softly. "No, we spoke before coming to Vexsis. He'll understand." Then he turns his gaze to me. "And, um, you could talk to me if you want."

"Huh?"

"You can talk to me," he repeats. "About what you went through at the church, how you got there, whatever really."

"What brought this up?" I ask, suddenly feeling exposed. I glance about the room expecting someone to burst out of the walls to announce that we're being watched. By who? No clue, but it makes me shuffle my weight from one foot to the other.

"The fact that we're both mortals twisted by the church now living among those we were told are the enemy, it makes us have more in common. I thought since I felt better writing this letter with you around, you might feel alright speaking to me about..." He furrows his brows. "Something."

"Something," I repeat. "I may be shit with grammar, but you've got a horrendous vocabulary."

Seren shrugs. Now that the ink has dried, he grabs an envelope from the desk to put the letter in. Once it's sealed, the letter seems more real, like he can't turn back. This moment reminds me of my own, the few throughout my life where I realized everything would change. Those changes were never good until I saw Lore in Trinia Cathedral. That's when the path my life had been descending on faster and faster finally started to move up towards the light. Strange how Seren seems to have had a similar path,

albeit much longer, and maybe that is what makes me realize that I wouldn't mind talking.

Lore's the only one who knows my full story. I cried about it some nights, tucked under the covers as he sat on the edge of my bed listening. Just listening. He never pried. I said what I needed to say and he wouldn't leave unless I wanted him to. Sometimes we'd sneak into the kitchens to snack on cookies and sometimes they'd already be in my room so we were prepared for the eventual tears. I never worked up the courage to tell anyone else. I don't know why. And I don't know why it's changing now, but it feels like Seren has been chipping away so gently at my walls that I didn't realize he punctured them until it's too late.

"My parents weren't good people," I mumble, staring at the letter as if it's now meant to become my own. "My mother was selfish, greedy, and never wanted children, so she resented me. My dad was just a patron, some drunk who was barely around. Our house, if you want to call it that, was filthy."

The memories of that dingy plate, mold in the corners of the yellow stained walls and sheets pinned up over broken windows, makes my skin crawl. I crave to itch and itch, barely preventing myself from doing so by clutching the edge of the desk.

"They never cared about me, but I was a kid. I still expected my parents to protect me. They didn't. Sometimes... sometimes my mom brought her patrons home, who showed a little too much attention to me." I hear Seren's chair shift, though I dare not look at him. If I do, I might stop. Although the past is scary to talk about, it's somehow so much better to tell someone. "Nothing went so far as to--they never--I always got away in time, but one night I fought back pretty hard and hurt a very important patron. Mom didn't like that. I guess she thought it was better to sell me than keep me."

My teeth grind making my jaw ache painfully, but nothing compares to the pain of that day. The one where I watched a dhampir hand her a wad of cash. She counted the money with a smile on her face and I learned that my life had a price. Not even a high price, just a bit of cash to tide her over for a month or so. She didn't even hesitate.

"I knew the guy, a dhampir she worked with so I... I knew where I was going and what I would be expected to do. I was barely ten fucking years old when I went into that brothel and saw what was happening to kids like me. They bathed me, put me in more *appropriate attire* , told me what to do, and tossed me into a room with some old fucking vamp. I panicked. He kept grabbing me. I knew what he was going to do and I--"

Seren grasps the end of my sleeves to ease my hands away from my neck. I see the blood on my fingers, realizing I had started tearing the skin at my neck, then catch Seren's angered stare. It does feel good to see that, like he's angry for me, that I have every right to be angry, but...

"That's the first time I used magic," I whisper, hands shaking from the brilliant orange and red I see with every blink of my eyes. "Fire. There was so much fire. I saw... the other kids, I swear I saw them go up in flames. The flames I made. They looked relieved. I somehow felt relieved too. Other buildings caught fire and I bolted. I never found out how many people died that night."

"You didn't mean to do that," Seren whispers, continuing to hold the sleeves of my shirt to prevent me from scratching. I still flick my nails though, desperate to keep my hands busy, to focus on something other than those hands grabbing me, pulling at my hair, and people whispering terrible things in my ear.

"You were terrified. Everyone would be. You protected yourself in the only way you could. Is that how the church found you?" he asks.

"Yeah. Surveyors came to town and convinced me to go with them. I was starving, living on the streets, and desperate for a home, so I went. I believed their bullshit at first because it... it was the first place I'd ever been where I felt cared for. I had a nice room, a clean home, friends, good food, books, toys, whatever I wanted and I knew no one would s-sell me."

"You said it yourself, that's what they prey on," he says.

"They've always been damn good at it."

"Yeah." Seren releases my sleeves, determining that I'm not a detriment to myself or anything around us. Although that may change any moment. I've always been a bit explosive.

"Don't talk to anyone about this," I say, shuffling my feet. "Especially not Draven."

"Draven doesn't know?"

"Absolutely not."

"May I ask why?"

"By asking that, you've made asking if you can irrelevant," I reply, glaring at Seren's awkward smile. "But no, you may not ask because it doesn't matter why."

He makes a face that says he disagrees before he actually says it, "I think it matters a lot and it may be a big reason why you two keep dancing around the issue."

"What issue?"

"The liking each other issue."

I choke on my own saliva, then slap my chest. "Maybe you shouldn't send that letter because it's clear you aren't in your right mind."

Seren sighs. "I have never been more clear headed than now, so if I may give a small piece of advice; we need to stop letting our past dictate our future. If we don't, we'll never actually move forward."

Offering a soft smile, Seren stands up and leaves the room though he hesitates in the doorway. Looking back at me, he says, "Thanks for telling me and, if you ever want to talk about anything else, I'm here."

I give him a dismissive wave until he disappears. Falling back onto the couch, I knock the heel of my foot against the floor to a random rhythm. Moving on from my past isn't so easy because it clings to me in a much

more physical way. I glare at my hands. My neck stings from itching it earlier, a reminder of what happens when I try to move on. I press my palm to the irritated skin, mouthing a short spell to heal the minor wound. Though the physical pain leaves, the mental agony always remains.

Let's say I try to talk to Draven, let's say our feelings were mutual, he deserves much more than what I can give. I can't bear the idea of asking him to wait for me. Wait until I can hold his hand without ripping my skin off. Wait until we can kiss without having a panic attack afterwards. How could I ask that of him when I have no idea if I ever will overcome this?

And telling Draven what happened to me is much different than telling Seren. I don't want him to know about where I came from, what my parents were like, what happened to me. I just don't. It's scary to think about. It's scary to imagine how he'll react, even if deep down I think I know he won't care. That doesn't ease this anxiety because that isn't how nerves work. They don't make sense. If they did, the world would be a much simpler place.

"Cyan?" Draven calls. I freeze. His footsteps grow closer, then he's standing in front of me. "I saw Seren head up to his room. Have you talked to him yet?"

"Uh, yeah, we talked."

"How did it go?"

I gaze up at his stupidly attractive face and pretty orange eyes. The ones that I've seen many people shiver in fear from, but they've always made me short of breath. Long before these feelings ever came to me, I thought they were the prettiest shade I'd ever seen. If Seren can move on from the church, I can move on from my own past, can't I? He never imagined this day would come. And I can't imagine ever changing. I can do this. I can tell him.

"Cyan?" He calls and I take a deep breath, hoping to steel myself for what I'm about to say.

"Seren's leaving the church." But I cop out like a coward.

"Relieving news," he says.

"Yeah. It's great." I get up from the couch, wishing to escape when I know it's hopeless. I can't escape my own cowardice.

I feel Draven's gaze on me when I walk by. My hands clench into painful fists. The heat of embarrassment tickles the back of my neck, so I hurry to my room where I lock myself away for the remainder of the day.

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We've learned about Cyan's past. Were you expecting this? Will he ever be able to move on from his past and talk to Draven? We also got the official letter Seren will be sending to th e church to renounce his title. So much going on! Reminder, if you want to read 15 chapters ahead and anything extra I've written, head over to patreon. It costs $2 to get access to a lot of content or you can follow my patreon for updates about future projects. If you follow, you don't pay anything, you just get to see content that I post publicly ^_^ I've left an external link or just go to patreon.com/twoony

79. Becoming What You Want

Warning: Mature content. Please keep comments respectful.

Seren P.O.V.

The letter sits on the end stand by the armchair in my room. I pick at a stray string on the chair. My eyes focus on the letter, recalling what's written within; renouncing my title as paladin to become Seren Farshine again.

I grasp the letter, retrieving the paper from the envelope to read over for the tenth time. The words never sound right. Even with Cyan at my side to write them, there's so much more I want to say. Vile words. Sorrowful ones. An apology to Olere, even if he assured me that this choice is my own. A curse at Paladin Nallin for frightening me, for abusing me as a scared child. A threat to Priest Aja and others like him for I don't believe I could restrain myself from harming him, at the very least, if we crossed paths again.

My hands shake so badly that the words blur in my vision. Then another hand comes into view to ease the letter from my grasp. I know who it is before Lore surprises me by making himself mighty comfortable in my lap. I grasp his waist instinctively, preventing him from stumbling to the floor. His arm wraps around my neck as he leans towards me, bringing warmth, comfort, and the strong scent of sweet apples. I bask in him, resting my head on his shoulder. He has his hair in a ponytail today, but a few strands have come loose to tickle my cheek.

After reading over the letter, Lore sets the paper on the endstand, then rests his hand beneath my chin. He eases me to look at him, a soft smile on his lips. "You did good," he says.

Is it silly to feel better from three simple words?

"We can send the letter from my estate in the capital if you would prefer, or I could accompany you to Trinia to make sure no one bothers you," he suggests.

I snort. "I think they would bother me more if you came along, especially since the last time you were there Cyan left with you."

"I suppose I am making quite a name for myself at the church." His grin widens. "Stealing a child, then one of their beloved paladins who shall from this day forth warm my bed."

I bite my lip to prevent a far too eager smile. "Is that the reason you *stole* me?"

"Not the only reason, but it's certainly high on the list. Second spot, actually."

We both laugh. He presses his lips gingerly against mine. I hold him a little tighter, enjoying these moments of intimacy. Before, when he got this close, I panicked. I wanted him, but I feared the thought of taking hold. Now, I fear the idea of letting go.

"I already planned to mail the letter," I say. "It'll be easier and I need easier right now."

Lore nods. I release a curse when his cool fingertips push beneath my shirt. Then his lips are on my neck, a soft caress mirroring the touch of his hand across my chest. My grip tightens on his waist, startled by the abrupt affection.

"Is your answer to tense situations always going to be sex?" I tease, not missing how quick he is to start unbuttoning my shirt.

"No, but I thought it would make a very good distraction," he replies, retreating to rest his forehead against mine. It'd be a touching moment if not for his hand tugging the belt from my pants. A bundle of nerves tighten in my stomach. My gaze drifts over his shoulder towards the door, fearful that someone might see. Not just Draven or Cyan, but the vampires here and who they might tell.

"I shut and locked the door," Lore reassures me. I hate that he has to, that my initial reaction was to make sure no one saw us.

How must that make Lore feel? Sensing that I want this to be secret. Would he believe I'm still hung up on him being a dhampir or that I'm not ready to be seen with him? I don't want that. I don't want to make him feel that way. I don't want to hear that frustration in his voice as he tries to hide that he's okay.

"Lore, hold on," I say, against his lips. I'd love to continue kissing him, but I do have something to say. He retreats, gazing down at me with a curious expression. I bite back a groan when he squirms in my lap. Now is not the time to let my dick do all the talking.

"I don't want it to always be like this," I blurt out, puzzling him more based on questioning gaze. "Us, I mean. Like this, in secret. You're not... I don't want you to feel like you're a dirty secret."

Lore stares for a few long moments, somehow left speechless. He squirms again, forcing me to tighten my grip on his waist. "I understand," he eventually says. "A lot is happening. I will be sympathetic, for now, but I am very needy. I do expect a lot of attention while we are in private."

"Lore," I whisper, leaning up to catch his lips. He's surprised, eyelashes fluttering for a brief moment. "I'm serious. I know that I ran before and I tried to avoid this, avoid you, avoid us, like back on the airship."

"Your reaction was understandable."

"This is when you should admit that I hurt your feelings."

Lore purses his lips. His gaze drifts to the floor.

"If I upset you, tell me," I say, reaching up to brush a few strands of hair from his face to tuck behind his ear.

"It did upset me," he mutters. "I was naive to think that you'd miraculously be okay with what we'd done."

"I don't think it was naive. You just hoped we'd stop dancing around each other and I want to stop. I don't want to pretend like these feelings aren't

here anymore, do you?"

"I wasn't really the one hiding my feelings," he says, yelping when I pinch his side. "Okay, don't get grouchy." His fingers run through my hair, twisting a few strands around his fingers. "I don't want to pretend, but I genuinely don't want you forcing yourself either."

"I'm not. I'm really not. This isn't about the church or you being a dhampir. I don't fucking care anymore. However, I don't think it's safe to show ourselves publicly here. With Valyork, his children, those bastards outside, we need to be careful. I imagine after seeing our matching suits," I give him a playful glare that he rolls his eyes at. "They may suspect something, but it's better to be safe than sorry. We'll wait until we're home to be open."

Lore gapes, followed by a bright smile for some reason. He grips the collar of my shirt to crash his lips against mine. His tongue slips past my lips, mapping out every inch of my mouth. He kisses me hard, passionate, mind numbing, then retreats.

"What was that for?" I ask, heaving long breaths.

"You said home," he whispers.

I feel heat raging beneath my cheeks to the back of my neck. "Uh, well, you said I could stay with you, so Seymour Manor is home, right?"

"Yeah, it is." Lore is about to lean in for another kiss, but my mind decides to remind me of--

"The kids!" I shout, surprising him enough that he almost falls out of my lap. I hold him tightly. "Shit, what are the kids going to do if we return holding hands or kissing in front of them?"

Lore chuckles.

"We can't do that out of nowhere. They don't have faith in me yet. What if they get scared and think I'm some evil paladin trying to steal their Papa?"

Lore's chuckles turn to full on laughter, the sound growing louder the more I panic, which makes me panic more because this isn't a laughing matter!

"What if they feel obligated to call me some form of Dad, but they don't want to and that makes them build resentment towards the both of us? And there's even the chance that they'll feel like I'm taking up the time you could be spending with them. We need to consider how to approach this--"

"Seren," he calls, gripping my cheeks so my lips purse like a fish. His cheeks are flushed from his laughter, making him even more beautiful. It shouldn't be possible, but I swear he grows in beauty every passing day. "Your concern is very kind and it's proof that the kids can only do better with you around," he adds.

"What do you mean? They're still scared of me. I'm only tolerable because they feel safe knowing you're there, but if we're together and they see that, that comfort could completely crumble."

"They aren't scared of you," he urges. "Remember the day we played hide and seek? The kids loved that. They had so much fun, even Ashby kept talking about how nice you were when he hurt his ankle. They don't know you well, that's all. We'll change that and they'll be very lucky to have another around who worries about them."

"But what if they don't want to spend more time with me? What if they hate," I gesture between us. "This?"

"Stop worrying so much." He grabs my hand to kiss every knuckle, making my heart palpitate.

"I can't help it. There's so much going on. I don't," I press my forehead against Lore's chest, holding him tightly against me. He's so warm. "I can't seem to grasp what I'm doing. Something else pops up every time I think. If I'm not a paladin anymore, what am I? And if I go home with you, what am I there? What should we be?"

"We have more time than you think to figure that out. In fact, why don't we experiment a bit tomorrow? I'll spend the day with you in town. We'll stop

at a few stores, grab you some more clothes, maybe purchase a book or two, so you may search for new interests. You can learn what the real Seren likes," he says, smiling.

I don't know what I'm more nervous about; us going out together after the fiasco with Valyork or me attempting to find what I like. What if I don't really like anything? What if I am just a murderous paladin?

"We don't need to do that all at once if you don't want to," he adds, likely sensing my tension. "But I do think it's okay to start somewhere. You're free now, Seren."

Lore surprises me by stepping out of my lap. I'm about to ask where he's going when he gets to his knees. I see that distracting me with sex is still on his mind and, frankly, it's on mine too.

My breath hitches in my throat when he kisses my chest, whispering against my goosebump covered skin, "You can become what you want."

I groan when his hand starts to fondle me through my pants. His lips move down my chest, nipping at the sensitive skin above my happy trail.

"You can kiss who you want." His hands grab the hem of my pants. I lift my hips, allowing him to shimmy the garments off my legs.

"What is it that you want, Seren?" He asks, gripping the base of my cock.

"I want you."

"That's a good answer," he says, starting to pump my shaft. "I want you too."

My hips thrust into his warm hand, pleasure coursing through me. Lore's touch is a burning fire that doesn't know pain, only pleasure. He leans in to crash his hungry lips against mine, eager and intoxicating. I tug on his jacket, desperate to feel his smooth skin. I literally just saw him this morning, every piece of him, but I want more. I want to see him again, over

and over for the rest of our lives, which is somehow an exhilarating and terrifying thought. What has he done to me?

Lore marks my neck. My hands dig into his bare shoulders, trying to hold on to reality as his hand moves faster on my arousal. Pleasure coils in my stomach, burning embers hissing through my veins. Then the damn dhampir moves down my chest, lower and lower until he reaches the part of me that's most desperate for his attention. The moment his lips encase my arousal, I'm lost to the sensations of his skilled mouth. His arm presses my hips to the chair, preventing me from thrusting into his heat. He teases me with slow ministrations, the slow caress of his tongue along my shaft. He sucks on my tip, sending my senses into overdrive. My heels dig so hard into the carpet they could leave permanent imprints.

Then Lore's on the move again, sucking me off until his cheeks go hollow. My moans encourage him. He moves slowly when I grow too loud, dragging my pleasure out. Then he pumps my shaft, allowing his lips to caress my thighs. He kisses up my abdomen to my chest, taking my nipple between his teeth. He rolls the nub over with his tongue, using his thumb to tease the slit of my cock.

"Fuck, Lore," I gasp, hoping that we won't be stopping here tonight. As if he read my mind, Lore steps away. I watch him slip out of his jacket, teasing me by slowly undoing the buttons of his shirt. With a swing of his hips, his pants drop, allowing me to admire his beauty. I could never grow tired of this, nor the feeling of his naked body pressed against mine. I've become addicted, yearning for every bit of him. His attention. His smile. His laughter. His voice. His body, everything he has I want. I've never wanted anything or anyone as I want him; as I need him. I'd say this yearning is frightening, but by the way Lore kisses me, by the way he runs his hands over my body, it makes me think he feels the same.

Lore rests in my lap now, thighs on either side of me. He moans when I take firm hold of his ass. Our bodies rock against one another to make the room unbearably hot. I mark his chest, hungry for more of him. Lore whimpers when I play with his nipples, kissing the perked nubs before abusing them with my teeth. His hips move faster, grinding against mine the rougher I get.

"Get the lube," he says, moaning when my teeth tear into his neck. One flick of my wrist and a spell has the lube zipping across the room. Lore continues grinding against me when my first finger slips into his entrance. He kisses me, rocking his hips in slow motions that leave me reeling. Then the second finger wiggles in. He groans into the kiss, now resting against me as I spread him.

Reaching between us, I take hold of his arousal, wishing to ensure he feels as good as I do. Lore takes me to heights of ecstasy I didn't know possible. His sweet moans against my lips are hopefully a sign that he feels the same.

Lore thrusts into my hand, whimpering from the double stimulation. Initially, he can't decide whether to move against my hand or my fingers. But when my third finger joins and they curl inside him, Lore reacts beautifully; back bowed, mouth agape in ecstasy, and hair plastered to his flushed skin. He pushes back into my fingers, forcing them deeper, then he's whimpering from the rough penetration. I thrust deep inside him, curling my fingers to make his body spasm.

"Stop, stop," he says, breathlessly. "I'm ready."

I try to calm myself, to prepare for the heat I know to come. I want this to last. It's never enough with Lore. I want him more and more every passing moment. Watching him raise his hips, one hand reaching for my erection, I can't imagine anything more arousing. He lowers his hips slowly, making me groan from the heat suffocating my arousal. Lore chuckles, enjoying the slow penetration. He now rests his hands on my shoulders, letting himself ease onto my erection.

"Does that feel good?" he asks, biting my lip.

"Incredible," I answer, still firmly holding him. I kiss him, starving for his attention.

His hands run across my shoulder, down my arms, then over my chest. His hips begin a slow rolling motion, letting my cock rub against his walls. Then he raises his hips only to slam back down. It knocks the breath from my lungs and again when he repeats the action. Lore cries out, nails tearing

into the chair. My own groans mirror his, the pleasure coursing through me hotter than any flame. He rides me fast, thrusting his hips with such intensity that I can't keep up. I admire his body, his muscles, the pleasured expression on his face, loving that I'm the one putting it there. There's lust in his eyes that mirrors my own. I pull him in for a long kiss, relishing in these feelings tearing me apart. Then I'm kissing his neck, his shoulder, his chest, whatever I can because I can't get enough.

White's already lining my vision. This angle of Lore makes the pleasure burn hotter. I can't take my eyes off him, his lustful eyes and his swollen parted lips that release erotic noise after erotic noise. My orgasm hits me hard. Lore curses, careening over the age too. He presses himself hard against me, moaning my name. There's only the sound of our heavy breathing afterwards. Bodies drenched in sweat, but I'm unbelievably comfortable with Lore in my arms. I kiss his temple, his neck, his shoulders, everywhere. He leans back, grasping my chin to kiss me. Tongues lapping languidly, teeth biting at lips, then he's marking my neck.

"We should really take a shower," I say, brushing the hair from his face. The ponytail is very loose now, allowing his deep ebony hair to frame his face. I never knew I liked long hair this much until now. I like playing with his hair, feeling the strands tickle my skin, and how it drapes over his shoulders. He's really the most beautiful man I've ever seen.

"Will you carry me to the shower tonight too?" He asks, already wrapping his arms around my neck. He nuzzles into my neck when I carefully remove the band from his hair, letting it cascade down his back. Then I grab his thighs. Lore laughs when I stand up, his legs wrapping tightly around my waist.

"Is this going to be my new nightly duty?" I ask, shivering from the kisses he litters all over my neck.

"I'll carry you from time to time," he whispers huskily against my ear. "Whenever it's my turn to take you."

My shiver doesn't go unnoticed. I feel his smirk against my cheek.

"I didn't hear a no," he whispers, making me swallow hard in, damn it all, eager anticipation.

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I hit an important milestone on patreon so I decided to add a sex scene rather than fade to black. I've been oddly okay with writing them recently, probably because I haven't received any weird comments, woohoo! Anyway, our boys still had some serious discussion. Seren wants Lore to know that he wants to be open, just not here. Do you agree that they need to be more hesitant in Vexsis? And how will the children feel if they see Lore with Seren? How do you think Seren will react when they take a day to try and find what he's really interested in?

80. Lies and More Lies

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I ask, sitting next to Lore in the car.

"Yes, why wouldn't it be?" He asks.

I glance at our "chaperones" in the front seat. Two more were sent with Draven and Cyan after Lore discussed our plans for the day with Draven. The butler decided to head to the nellore factory in Lore's stead to continue his investigations. Of course Cyan was excited to see the factory. Draven will have his hands full preventing the mad scientist from ripping everything apart to see what makes it tick. Then again, Cyan may become flustered once he realizes it's kinda like they went on another date.

While they do that, Lore and I head into town to go shopping, basically. Trying to find what Seren Farshine likes. I don't even know where to begin. How am I incapable of determining what I like? Shouldn't I just know? That isn't why I'm concerned though; spending time together with our chaperones always watching, their presence puts me on edge. I keep thinking of Valyork, of Roemithia and the plans I no doubt accidentally set in motion.

"Relax, that is the point of today," Lore says. The car comes to a stop. He steps out, waiting for me to exit before closing the door.

"How chivalrous," I tease. Lore gives an exaggerated bow. "So, where are we going first?"

"Let's walk down this street and see what catches your interest," he says, nodding at the line of shops.

We meander down the street. I glance at the windows, not sure what I'm meant to be interested in. I never had much; the clothes on my back, my trusty axe, and the Three Mother's Doctrine. I don't know what I want. But then I came to a stop in front of a toy store.

"We should get the kids something while we're here," I say, stepping through the front doors.

"While I do agree, we're meant to be shopping for you." Lore chuckles, following me.

The workers gape as if they've never laid eyes on a human before, although it's more like they've never seen one unchained and without a bag suffocating them. The girl at the counter forces a congenial smile that borders on physically painful to gaze upon. The man beside her averts his gaze. At least they leave us alone, allowing Lore and I to search the store, grabbing a gift for everyone, which reminds me.

"Oliver told me that he wants a dog."

Lore sighs like the father who has heard this request a hundred times. "Did he?"

"I said I would try to convince you." I hold up a stuffed animal, waving the dog's paw at Lore. "Personally, I think it would do all the children some good to have a dog."

"Do you know what will happen if we get a dog?" Lore argues, picking up a stuffed animal cat, rabbit, and horse to point at me. "All the kids will ask for an individual pet. Before you know it, we will have a zoo."

"...you have the space for one."

"Seren--"

"When we get to Nosa, we can stop at an animal shelter."

"No--"

"I like dogs. I wouldn't mind a cat either and we're meant to be discovering things that I like, right?" I smile at the light leaving Lore's eyes. "We should probably make plans to stop at a pet store too."

Setting aside the stuffed animals, he sighs. "You're opening the floodgates and you will regret it."

"Is that a yes to the dog?"

He doesn't answer, snatching one last gift before heading for the counter. Laughing, I follow behind him, checking that the guards aren't looking prior to linking our fingers for a brief moment. Standing behind him, I press a quick kiss to his shoulder. The girl at the counter doesn't notice as she bags our items. She didn't even have to check the price tags. The number appeared on the counter as if the tabletop knew what they were simply by being set on top of it. The technology here continues to baffle me. After placing our purchases in the car, Lore and I continue down the street. I don't know where to go, so I randomly step into a suit shop. It would probably be a good idea to purchase more rather than switching between the same three.

"Sir, bloodbags cannot enter without--" The worker stops when his eyes notice the green pin on my chest. His lips twist into a warped smile. "My apologies, I didn't notice your pin."

"That's alright. Accidents happen," I say, brushing by the worker, although I'm tempted to leave. Not like I know what to get from here anyway. I shuffle around a few suits, tugging on the hem of the sleeves.

"Start with a color that you like," Lore suggests. "Then we can grab a few jackets to try on and see what fit you prefer."

That shouldn't make me nervous. Shopping shouldn't be this anxiety ridden, but my fingers still fumble through a few jackets that I pick out randomly for the hell of it. There's a changing room where I try them on, determining that I like two of them.

"Why do you like those two?" Lore asks, sitting on a chair outside the changing room.

"They're easy to move in, so if I have to chase--" I stop myself, realizing that I subconsciously chose the suits I could *chase a vampire in* if the occasion arose. Lore's not a fool. He knew what I was about to say. I expect

disappointment, but he gives an understanding smile that somehow makes me feel both better and worse.

"It will take a while to lose that mindset. Don't fret over it," he says.

"How long is a while?" I yank off the jacket to hand to the worker that has been keeping a close eye on us since we arrived.

"Let's not think about that." Lore stands, handing over the jacket I wore today. I slip it back on, feeling out of place in the garment, knowing that Lore had to pick it out for me because I can't pick out one on my own. He rests a hand on my shoulder. "Today is a test run, the first of many. If you want, you can grab a few random items off the shelves for fun and see if they work out. You should take advantage of having a very rich lord seeking your affections."

I roll my eyes. "You shouldn't try to buy my affections when you already have them."

Lore places a hand over his heart. "Ah, hearing you say that makes me want to buy anything and everything." Then he smiles. "We'll work on this together, however long it takes."

I'd kiss him if the guards weren't nearby, so I make a mental note to cash the kiss in later. As Lore suggested, I grab a few random items that totally aren't my size, but who cares. We're being whimsical and unpredictable, which does leave me a bit jittery and it makes the next shop easier to handle until I notice the prices.

"Nevermind," I say, setting aside the silver cufflinks I had dared to pick up. There are far too many 0's even if I know money in Vexsis is different. Lore, however, picks the cufflinks right back up.

"Oh, these are gorgeous. You are definitely getting them." He shuffles towards the counter for "safe keeping," as he phrased it. I try not to grab anything else, but that just results in Lore picking up some very expensive rings that *would look great on your left ring finger* , which has me choking on my own saliva.

Lore has spent more than enough today, so I'm eager to return to the estate after loading up the car. The chaperones step into the front seats. I open the door for Lore. He gives an exaggerated gasp, dramatically slipping into the car like his legs suddenly went weak. Before I can follow him, I hear a loud smack followed by a pained shout. On instinct, I search for the person in trouble, perturbed to find a vampire beating a human man across the street.

"Hey!" I shout, rushing around the car. Horns blare at me on the road. The cars stop instantly.

"Stop!" I demand. The vampire mustn't even register that I am speaking to him. He snarls at the human, continuing to hit him with the handle of his cane as if it were a baseball bat. The human kneels, hands clenched tightly around their head, whimpering after every hit of the cane against their back.

I grasp the cane, startling the vampire enough to hiss at me. "How dare you," he says, raising a hand to strike me.

"I suggest you keep your hands to yourself for I will not cower should you hit me," I warn.

He bristles, puzzled into silence. I sense motion coming near me and retreat before the guards snatch me. They stand between me and the vampire, scowling and ready to make rude remarks, but Lore always has a talent for cutting in.

"Seren was just startled by what he saw," Lore explains, gently grasping my arm to tug me a few steps back. The vampires glare at me. Their attention shifts to Lore where they look equally as unimpressed.

"The paladin was warned not to start trouble," the guard growls. "He does not have the right to prevent a vampire from doing what they wish with their property."

"He is well aware of that, but we can't blame him for reacting after witnessing something he has never seen. Besides, no harm was done."

Plenty of harm was done to the human, who continues cowering beside the vampire. During the tussle, the cloth over his head slipped off, perhaps they even unknowingly removed it. I get a glimpse of his face, though battered and bruised, there's something oddly familiar about him.

Lore continues speaking with the guards, trying to convince them and the vampire to let this incident go. His words become jumbled in my head. I wrack my brain for why this man looks so familiar. He sits there desperately trying to catch his breath, a wheezing sound leaving his pale and cracked lips. Teeth marks scar his neck. His skin is abnormally pale, eyes surrounded by dark bags and a gruesome bruise--his eyes, he has one brown eye and one green eye--those eyes finally look at me. He grows eerily still, then trembling hands struggle to put the bag back on.

"Wait," I call, grunting when Lore holds tighter to my arm.

"Thank you for understanding," Lore says, guiding me towards the car. "We'll be leaving now."

"No, that man, let me see his face. One more second," I argue.

Lore pulls me hard, whispering harshly against my ear, "No, we have to leave."

"But that man, he--I know him. I know that I know him. I met him..." In Trinia. Fuck. "Lore, I knew that man at the orphanage. He spoke against the church. I know it was him."

Lore holds so tight to my arm that his nails pierce the fabric. Eyes chilled as a winter storm freeze me in place when he says, "And so what if it is? Will you rip that mask off and have Warlords sent upon us? Because even you cannot battle back an army."

Glancing over my shoulder, I catch the guards waiting, just waiting with these wicked grins to test me. The vampire with the cane hasn't left either. He stands beside the mortal man, a single finger tapping against his cane like he's considering hitting the human again purely to piss me off, to test my resolve. The guards want me to do something. They want me to jump

that bastard and beat him with his own cane so they'll have an excuse to attack, to try and rip me to shreds. I'd sooner do that to them, but Lore's right, the fight wouldn't end there. Valyork would take the excuse to destroy us both.

So I follow Lore to the car and take a seat in the back where we wait for the guards. They take their time, further testing me. I catch their amused grins through the rearview mirror. They liked that I saw that, that I witnessed someone like me getting hurt. And when I peer out the window, I find that bastard shoving the man down the street so hard that he stumbles and falls. I look away, keeping my attention on the road ahead of us all the way to the estate.

"I'll have someone come out to get our purchases," Lore says, stepping out of the car. "Let's head inside."

Because he knows I may do something to the guards if we don't.

Draven and Cyan aren't back yet, otherwise Cyan would have met us at the door. That's probably for the best because I barely manage to contain myself on the walk to Lore's room where I repeat, "I knew him."

"Are you sure?" Lore asks, shutting the door behind him.

"I'm telling you, he was at the orphanage in Trinia, a few years younger than me." My shaking hands grasp the back of one of the chairs. I hear the wood moaning beneath, a second away from snapping beneath my rage. "I don't recall his name, just those eyes and his voice because he spoke against the church frequently. They told us he left, but he's here. How did he get to Vexsis? We have to find out who that vampire was and speak to him--"

"Seren," Lore rests a hand on my back. "You witnessed something terrible that you didn't have the power to stop. You're upset. You could have been seeing things."

I gape at him.

"You can't even remember this man's name, but you claim to recognize him when he's half beaten and it's been, what, years since you've seen him?" Lore adds.

"Do not try to convince me that I am hallucinating. I know damn well what I saw and I know him."

"Or you think you know what you saw and you want to know him to convince yourself to go save him."

"Why won't you believe me?"

"Because that man was beaten beyond recognition and you're upset."

"You keep saying I'm upset, but that does not make me incapable." I shove his hand off me and step away. Lore reaches towards me. I smack that hand away too. "Why aren't you even trying to believe me?"

This doesn't feel right. Lore gazes at me with that solemn look, like he thinks I've lost a few marbles, but something doesn't sit right with me.

"I just told you that I recognize the man getting beaten by a vampire as a once member of the church who openly condemned them and their practices, but you are adamant that I'm just," I make air quotes. "Upset."

"Seren..."

"More pressingly, you're not the least bit surprised to hear that I recognize him."

"Because I don't think you saw who you thought you saw," he argues.

"Or you do think I saw him and you're trying to convince me otherwise. Why?"

"Now you're being paranoid."

"What's going on?" I ask through clenched teeth.

"You're unbelievably unsettled, that's what is going on," he replies, trying to get close.

I walk around the chair, keeping the furniture between us. "And you're hiding something."

"Unsettled *and* paranoid."

"Call it what you want, but I'm right. What secret are you hiding from me now?"

Lore chuckles, sounding tired. "I have plenty of secrets you've yet to learn, Seren, but this isn't one of them."

We stare at one another, predators waiting for the first to strike. He won't give in. I won't back down.

"I've been lied to by the church my whole life and now you're lying too," I say, taking note of how stiff his shoulders become at the accusation. I stomp towards the door. "Fine. I will determine what's happening myself."

"And how will you do that?" He argues, chasing after me. He takes my hand, holding tight enough that it aches. "Are you going to search the town for that man and hope you stumble across him?"

"I have divinity. I'll find him before morning."

"And what about the guards? Or any vampire in Vexsis? Do you think they won't notice a paladin hopping through the rooftops?"

"I won't hop. I'll walk down the street dressed in gloomy clothing. I'll fit right in."

One powerful yank and Lore has me barreling towards him. His arm catches my waist, keeping me firmly against his chest.

"Release me," I growl, pressing a hand to his chest in warning.

"Drop this, Seren," he whispers so softly I almost don't believe he spoke.

"So you were lying."

Lore sighs and holds me a little tighter. Our eyes meet. There's a silent competition, yet another test that I win because Lore finally whispers, "You are not ready to hear every truth. This is for your safety--"

"Fuck that." I shove him hard. He stumbles, grasping the chair to keep him upright. "The church lied to me too. They fed me lies to *keep me safe.* "

"This is entirely different."

"It isn't! Either you tell me the truth or we will not speak again."

Lore's shoulders slump. His hand trembles atop the chair. His eyes plead with me to change my mind, but I won't. I've been left in the dark most of my life. Lore was meant to be different, but he looks away and proves that he isn't.

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Whoa, lots happened this chapter. We got some cute stuff at the beginning with Seren convincing (ordering) Lore to get a dog, but then it was ruined! Seren thinks he recognizes the man he saw today. Do you think it's who Seren believes it is? What does it mean if it is? And what secret is Lore hiding from him? If you absolutely have to know, reminder that my patreon is 16 chapters ahead plus some extra content. And if you stay through January, you'll get an early look at my upcoming novel ;D

81. Through the Gates

"Is there a reason we're having this meeting without His Grace?" Cyan asks from where he's seated on a couch in the library. He grabs a book laying on the coffee table to point the spine at me. "And that reason better be good because I will happily strut my short ass out of here."

I grin. "So you're fine discussing how short you are?"

"Discussing? No. Stating specifically from me? Yes. If you say it, I will shove this book so far up your ass that you'll word vomit it out."

"Noted." And a mental image I could have lived without.

Draven sits on the opposite end of the couch of Cyan, one leg perched elegantly over the other and arms crossed. His expression states that he will not strut out of here, but he will leave if I do not confess why I brought them both here after a very awkwardly silent dinner.

"Today, I witnessed a vampire beating a human man. When I saw that man's face, I realized that I recognized him." I glance at Cyan, who sits a little straighter. "He was at the orphanage in Trinia, a few years younger than me, and very openly condemned the church. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to speak to him, but I know what I saw."

"And what does His Grace have to say about this?" Draven asks the dreaded question. At least it's easier to hear His Grace rather than his name. Sitting by Lore at dinner made my teeth grind.

"He thinks because I was upset that I was seeing things, but that's only because he's hiding something and I'm going to discuss what that something is with the two of you." I press my foot against the coffee table and lean towards them. "It isn't a coincidence that there's someone here who condemned the church."

"I don't know. People get kidnapped by vampires and taken to Vexsis more frequently than you would think," Cyan argues, although the shuffling of his feet informs me that he's interested enough to talk. "What if it is a coincidence and he was just some poor sap grabbed on the street?"

"That's the problem. The church claims to send children somewhere safe to deal with their trauma and live peaceful lives. They should have done that for him, so why is he a walking blood meal in Vexsis?"

"Because even the church cannot keep their eyes on everyone," Draven says, sighing. "He would have been sent to another orphanage, but his life afterwards is his own. Do you honestly believe the church kept their eyes on him? He could have gotten involved with the wrong crowd and was illegally captured by vampires. The blood trade is vast, especially for mages. I wouldn't be surprised if there are hunters out there searching specifically for children leaving Trinia."

I stare at Draven long enough for him to ask, "What?"

"I think that is the most I've ever heard you speak."

He rolls his eyes.

"I've already considered exactly what you said and that is where my concern lies. The church isn't watching over these people, ensuring that they are safe. No doubt they would know if there are hunters searching for them."

"And that wouldn't make them want to stop the bastards," Cyan says. "If anything, the church would be grateful that the vampires have gotten the job done for them. Took care of the kid, like the church claimed they would, then don't have to worry about them growing up to start shit with them because the vampires drain them dry. It's a win-win situation for the church."

My stomach churns because that's what I was thinking. I don't want to believe it, even now. Realizing the church mistreated me is one thing.

Realizing that they may be sending children to their death is another. And I would no longer put it past them.

"I wish to speak to Olere about this," I admit, causing even Draven to gape at me like I've gone mad.

Cyan has the guts to say it. "You're one fucking bonkers biscuit," he says, laughing. "You want to talk to a champion about how they're possibly letting vampires suck the life out of kids? Rest in pieces, mad lad."

"Olere is a good man. He's like a father to me. If this is happening, I honestly don't believe that he knows about it."

"He likely suspects it and has done nothing," Draven argues. "He is a champion, after all. He knows people, knows that the church has secrets." Then he stands. "I advise against it, although I imagine my advice means very little to you."

Cyan watches Draven leave the room. Sighing, he stands too. I retreat from the coffee table, waiting for the boy to walk over to me. He pats my shoulder, donning a sorrowful look.

"I think speaking to Olere is the nuttiest of the nuttiest decisions," he says. "But I kind of understand that you have to do it. Just make sure that the two of you are alone and you can get out of there in case anything goes wrong."

"When you say that, it sounds like you're concerned about me."

"I'm concerned about what His Grace will do and thus make me do if anything happens to you," he argues, scoffing. "He may actually go to war with the church. While I would love and excel at burning that cathedral to the ground, I don't think we have the manpower to survive the ordeal."

"I do hope you aren't serious about burning any cathedrals," Lore says from the open doorway, a book in his hand.

"I would never do so without your express permission." Cyan chuckles, stepping away from me to head for the exit. I wish he'd stay. I actually reach

for his hand, but he moves too swiftly. His departure leaves Lore and I alone. He waits until Cyan's footsteps are gone to approach me.

"Having a group meeting without me? I'm hurt," he says. I step around him, ignoring his words. He grasps my wrist, pulling me towards his chest. "Are we really not going to talk?"

"Tell me the truth."

"Seren--"

"The truth."

Lore surprises me by smiling, neither kind nor charming. There's a coldness to his eyes, a distance to his smile, and a warning to his voice, "You are not ready for the truth."

I yank my hand from him and stomp out of the room.

We don't speak for the remaining two days.

Lore finishes his inspection of the mine. A group of three miners and two office workers are arrested, although Draven claims they were definitely working for someone. There's nothing Lore can do about that. He doesn't have the power to bring down whoever meddled. I'm almost glad to hear that because I'm feeling petty. He won't speak to me. He won't tell me what he's hiding, so my mind reels. What am I missing? Why am I *not ready* for the truth?

We don't speak on the airship either. When we head for our rooms, I bunk up with Cyan. He isn't pleased by my decision, but I'm not rooming with Lore. I don't eat with them either, not from Lore's lack of trying. I sat at another table. He tried to join me. I left immediately. I'm not sure what will happen in Rhamie or Nosa. We're meant to visit an animal shelter to get a dog. Maybe Cyan will tag along, although he seems to be getting very fed up with me after I've taken so much alone time from him and Draven. The only time he doesn't show me a bit of disdain is on our first day back in Rhamie, when I've grabbed my letter renouncing my title of paladin.

"Tell me you're still mailing that out and not taking it to the possibly homicidal champion," Cyan says, standing in the foyer.

"I am not mailing this and I will be taking it to the not homicidal champion," I reply, heading for the door.

Olere will know something is up when he sees what I'm wearing; a suit. My robes are folded in my bag with my necklace laying on top. My axe rests on my back. I will have to grow accustomed to it not being there.

Cyan waves. "Die quickly and painlessly."

"Thanks for the thoughtful wish."

On the street, I raise my hand to hail a cab. I want to get this over with as soon as possible. Trinia Cathedral sits in the distance, once a beauty beyond compare, but now the church is a nightmare. My skin crawls as my memories come pouring in of the many days and nights spent there. The pain, the fear, the mistreatment that I can now never forget. My fingers ache from how hard they clench my bag. Then the cab comes to a stop at the gates.

It's strange stepping out and having the guards question who I am. They don't recognize me in a suit. It takes them hearing my voice to realize, afterwards they swiftly apologize for holding up a paladin. I offer them a smile and step through the gates to the courtyard. In the distance, I see Paladin Nallin training new recruits. I swear I hear the slap of a rod against their backs. I flinch and move forward, determined to find Olere and get out of here, but then I notice someone.

"Jakoby?" I peer at the redhead across the yard. He sits alone on a bench munching on an apple while reading a book. It is him. "Jakoby, hey!" Jakoby looks up. I head over to him, smiling. "It's been a while. How are you?"

Jakoby stares for a long moment, flushed in the face. Glancing around briefly, he turns his attention back to me and smiles. "Hello... do I know you?"

Ouch, I knew Jakoby went off to train, but I didn't expect to be completely forgotten.

"Uh, Seren. We... met in Nosa," I reply, shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

Jakoby blinks, not a single moment of recognition in his eyes. Have I mistaken him for someone else? But he answered to Jakoby. Is he pretending to have forgotten me? Maybe I did something wrong and that's why he left a letter rather than talk to me in person, although he doesn't seem the type to do that. Nervously talk to me, sure, but this feels very out of character.

"I'm so sorry," he says, fiddling with his apple. "I really don't remember you. Did we go to church together?"

"We met there, yes." I don't know what to do. He really doesn't seem to remember me. I could understand that maybe he didn't have feelings for them then and just went along with it, but this feels very strange. Rather than linger here trying to determine Jakoby's sudden lapse in memory, I choose to leave him be. "Maybe I mistook you for someone else. Sorry to disturb you."

Blushing, Jakoby nods. I step out of the way. Though I do look over my shoulder to see if he's acting strange, all he does is munch on his apple and look embarrassed to have not remembered me. Could something have happened during training? They may have pushed him too hard. This is even more reason to speak with Olere.

I manage to make it to his quarters without running into any more surprises. I'm somewhat surprised that he's home and a bit regretful. Seeing Olere in the doorway smiling at me almost breaks me. Then his eyes take in what I'm wearing and his smile softens like he already knows.

"Hello Seren," he says, stepping aside to welcome me inside. "I'm glad you've made it back safely from Vexsis."

"Thank you." I step past him, keeping my head low. Why is it low? Why am I ashamed?

"Take a seat. I'll get us some tea." He walks towards the kitchen. I sit at the table, hugging the bag in my lap. Everything is too loud. The sound of Olere pouring us tea. The touch of the glass against the table. The slight squeak of the chair as he pulls it out to take a seat. The noises ring in my ears.

I don't hand him the letter yet. It remains wrinkled in my grasp.

"Olere, may I ask what you did, specifically, when you did take children from the church?" I ask. I feel his curious gaze, but dare not meet his eyes.

"It varied, but I was always approached by the priest in charge of the orphanage. They would notify me of an orphanage capable of taking in the child. I would escort them to the orphanage, stay a few days to make sure they felt comfortable, then return to my duties," he replied.

"What about afterwards? The church checks in on them, right?"

"Of course. I believe Priest Ohmar is in charge of that currently. He calls the orphanage to check in weekly. If the child doesn't adapt well there, they can be moved. Should they find a home, Priest Ohmar will request a local priest to inspect their housing and ensure they're comfortable."

"Do they stop checking in once they turn eighteen?"

"Check in's slow down to once a month, although I have been informed that many request we stop checking in. They wish to be separated from the church."

A convenient excuse, believable and easy to cover up. I take this chance to look at Olere, unsure if my bias is clouding my judgment. He doesn't appear to know anything. I hope he doesn't.

"Why are you asking this?" He asks, then his eyes brighten. He snaps his fingers, rising from the table to head towards the fireplace. "I completely

forgot. You asked me to check in on some of the children who left the church. Well, they aren't children anymore. I did receive a few updates."

Olere grabs an envelope from the fireplace to return to me. He nods, signaling for me to open it. I do so, a bit surprised to find a few pages of basic information such as home addresses and employment records, but it isn't everyone.

"There are quite a few people I haven't been able to locate. They don't keep in contact and are not interested in talking to the church," he explains. "Does this pertain to what you're asking about?"

"Somewhat." I fold the papers up to slip back into the envelope.

Suddenly, I don't want to speak to Olere. Not because he may know something, but because he likely doesn't. If I say anything, if I mention the church may be doing something shady, will that get him in trouble? Will that put him in harm's way? Olere is a champion, the greatest warrior I've ever seen, but he works alongside equally as great warriors, who may be in on this.

"Sorry to ask such weird questions. I've just been thinking a lot lately and I've..." I slid my letter to Olere, refusing to meet his eyes. "I've decided to leave the church."

I hear Olere's sudden intake of breath. I fear what he has to say. I fear his disappointment, even when I know he has already claimed that he is okay with whatever path I choose.

I set my bag atop the table and lay my axe beside it. "Inside this bag are my robes and necklace, everything that stated my title as paladin, and the axe purified and gifted from the church. Please take that letter to the Prophet for me."

"I will," he says, reaching for my hand before I can bolt. He stands, tugging on my hand to tell me to do the same. I still listen even if, technically, he isn't my superior anymore.

"Where will you go?" he asks gently. "Do you need anything? I have savings--"

"I will not take money from you. You deserve every bit of it," I interject, swallowing the lump in my throat. "You will learn the truth eventually, so I will admit that... that I'm returning to Silra with Lord Seymour. I know that's odd considering what has happened, but this is my choice and mine alone."

Olere doesn't question me. He doesn't make me feel bad for my decisions. He just hugs me like a father would, so tight and warm that I worry I'll melt.

"This better not mean I won't be hearing from you now," he says, ruffling my hair. "Phones exist for a reason."

I heave a long breath, trying to steady my voice. "I'll call."

"Frequently."

"Define frequently."

"I won't push for too much, so let's say once a week?"

I try not to cry into his shoulder. "I can do that."

"Good, good." He squeezes once more, then releases me. When I peer up at him, there's only love in his eyes. At least the church did provide me one great memory, one amazing thing and that's Olere. "I'd ask you to stay for lunch, but I think you need your rest. Come now, I'll walk with you to the gates."

Olere sets an arm around my shoulder, holding me close as we walk in silence. I think he knows I won't be able to contain myself if I do talk. At the gates, he hugs me again and whispers, "Take care, my boy."

"You too." Then I step through the gates and don't look back.

Seren has had a chat with Draven and Cyan. He ran into Jakoby, but he doesn't seem to recognize him. What the hell is going on there? And now Seren has officially left the church. Quite a lot happened this chapter. How are you feeling about all that?

Inksgiving Reward

Hello, hello friends! If you're unaware, Tapas has an event in November to support creators called Inksgiving. As a reward for that support, I wrote up an extra chapter for The Secrets of Lore Seymour and I'll write one for The Lonely Ones sometime this month. For this extra, I designed a What If scenario; What if I didn't put Seren and Lore through extreme trauma, live in a troublesome society, and they met as teenagers after living with their very loving families? lol Enjoy!

Winter is my favorite time of year for multiple reasons; snow, cuddling by the fire, soup somehow tastes even better, and The Winter Festival. For two days and nights, towns come alive with shimmering blue and silver lights designed by families, businesses, and mages. Sellers and entertainers gather on the streets to create a river of light, sounds, and amazing food. On the final night, everyone gets together to sing to the goddesses and cast lanterns into the sky. It has always been fun, however, this year I might have... gotten lost.

I don't see Mom, Dad, or Saul anywhere. One minute we were walking the streets together, the next I made a big blunder by listening to my stomach that led me towards a shop of tasty treats. My family could be anywhere. They will be in town square when the time comes, so no use panicking--that's what I repeat while pushing through the crowd munching on some sugar sticks that certainly do not help the anxiety building in my stomach.

That anxiety amplifies when I run into a brick wall; that wall being a tall dhampir's chest. A hand grasps my arm, guiding me towards them rather than letting me plummet to the cold ground. My heart's a moment away from bursting out of my chest when catching the beautiful deep blue gaze of this stranger. Long black hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, a few strands have slipped free to frame his features that offer a heart palpitating smile.

"Sorry, I didn't see you. I was in a rush," he says in a slightly high pitched tone that makes me believe he's around my age and unfairly gifted in height. Though I suppose all dhampir and vampires are.

"It's okay," I mumble, fairly certain that I am the one who ran into him, actually. I take a tentative step away even if this guy is super cute and I wouldn't mind him grasping my arm a little longer. That might mean talking though and I've yet to master how to talk to cute boys. While my friends have had their first kiss or first date, I'm left in the dust sputtering in front of any cute guy I see.

"Have you happened to see a tall woman with dark brown hair and a checkered red and white dress?" he asks, holding tightly to a small brown bag in his right hand. "She's my mom. We got separated in the crowd when I wandered off."

"O-Oh, me too." I laugh, holding up the treat that led to my lost self. "Sorry though, I haven't seen a woman like that, but uh..." I swallow hard. "W-we could look for our families together... so we aren't alone."

And definitely not because he's cute and I would mind spending more time with him.

"Okay," he replies around a coy smirk. "I'm Lore, by the way."

"Seren."

"Seren," he repeats, making me love my name in ways I never thought I would. "Nice to meet you."

"You too."

He gestures towards the street, following me through the sea of people. When someone pushes their way between us, almost making the lost boys get lost even more, Lore grasps the back of my jacket sleeve.

I raise a curious brow when he offers his arm, shrugging. "So we don't get separated," he explains.

Inner me screams in triumph. Exterior me releases a chuckled agreement while linking arms with Lore. We talk together among the silver and blue lights, warm from the overcrowded streets and each other. From time to time, I glance his way, sometimes catching him doing the same. We both smile then look ahead. Would it be so wrong to think that Lore likes walking with me like this too?

I offer Lore some of the treats I got, biting back a surprised squeak when he leans in to take a bite rather than grab the treats himself. Not that I mind in the least, but my heart will mind when it develops early problems.

"What's that?" I ask, pointing at the brown bag in his hand.

"Oh, a necklace," he answers, smiling proudly. "For my mom. I did some work for a few neighbors to get her something."

"That's nice. Are you close with your mom?"

"Yeah. It's just the two of us."

"Does she look like you?" I ask, trying to stand on my tip toes when our walking has stalled on the busy street. I peer over the crowd, searching for Lore's mother. "If so, it should be easy to find someone so pretty. Everyone will probably be gathering towards her."

I glance at Lore when he doesn't immediately answer. Smiling softly, he starts to bite his bottom lip. "You think I'm pretty?" he asks, causing my mind to collapse into a pile of goo.

"Uh..." I search for an escape, but on a busy street like this I can't even run. Then I stare at Lore, who brushes hair behind his ear in a teasing manner. However, the faint blush on his cheeks makes me want to think he's actually a little shy.

"I, um... y-yeah," I finally admit in the squeakiest voice I've ever made. I could make chipmunks jealous.

"Thank you." He gently nudges me. "I'd compliment you too, but you already look on the verge of exploding. We wouldn't want to risk spontaneous combustion."

That makes us both laugh. I hold a little tighter to his arm, relieved that I haven't completely mucked this up... or he could be too nice to tell me that I've made him uncomfortable. Oh no.

"Do you live around here?" Lore asks, guiding us onto another street. I don't know if he's keeping track of where we've walked or if we're going in circles at this point.

"Our farm is a short ways out of town," I answer, pointing in the general direction that I think our house is. "What about you?"

"I live a few blocks that way." Lore nods towards a street on my right, further puzzling me. I've lived here all my life and never seen Lore. I definitely would have remembered someone like him, the type of person who takes your breath away on sight, who makes your toes curl with a mere smile.

"Have you always lived there?"

He shakes his head. "We moved here a few months ago when my mom got offered a new job."

"Oh, that's great!" I chirp, happy that he's nearby and sounds like it'll stay that way, but then I realize that might be a little mean. "Uh, not that you had to move from your home and away from friends; the new job is great since I'm assuming that accepting that position means that it is better than the last one. If it's not though, that isn't great?"

Even Lore's chuckle is gorgeous, making my stomach do backflips and heart bang as loud as a drum.

"I wasn't originally happy about the move, but my mind might be changing," he says, giving me a brief glance that will make me scream into a pillow once I'm alone, but then I hear my mom.

"Seren!" she calls, bringing my attention towards her at the end of the street. She stands with Saul, waving an enthusiastic hand while Saul has taken immediate notice of the arm link I have with Lore. He proceeds to shove a finger in his mouth and pretends to vomit.

"I'm guessing that is your brother," Lore says.

I sigh. "Unfortunately, yeah."

"Ah, and there's my mom." Lore points to the opposite direction, a few shops down where a woman in a checkered dress waves at us. They do look similar and that may be why a few people speak to Lore's mom in a clear attempt to garner her attention. One man offers flowers that I'm guessing were not originally intended for her. Wow.

"I better go save her," Lore says though he doesn't release my arm.

"Yeah, I better get to my mom. Dad's probably out looking for me so now we have to find him." I laugh, also not letting go. We stand together a moment longer and all I want to do is ask if we can talk together again. Maybe we could... get tea together? Or meet up with friends for a snowball fight, anything--

"Do you want to hang out sometime?" Lore asks with that faint blush on his cheeks. "We can grab something to eat or go ice skating?"

"I like ice skating," is all I manage to mumble.

"Is this Wednesday okay?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, it's a date."

"Yeah." Why am I repeating myself? Did he even hear me? I guess so because he finally releases my arm. Taking a few steps backward, he waves goodbye, then walks away. I'm about to do the same when it hits me.

"Lore!" I call. He turns to face me, curious, then smiling when I ask, "Do you mean a date like a date-date?"

He laughs and gives a slow nod. "I'd like it to be a date-date."

"Me too! I'd really like that."

"Good. See you Wednesday, Seren."

It's my turn to wave goodbye, watching Lore move through the crowd to his mom. She takes hold of his hand, smiling brightly when she opens his gift. Her attention drifts to me and she whispers something to Lore that makes him look back. My heart skips a few more beats, already excited about seeing him again on Wednesday. His bright smile tells me that he's happy about it too, and the fact that it was his idea, but my brain isn't functioning as it usually does right now. Then Lore turns and walks away. I'm not sad to see him go when I know I'll be seeing him again and I can't wait!

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Short and sweet. Hope y'all liked it. I just thought these two would immediately be attracted to each other no matter how they met. Seren would think Lore's the prettiest man he has ever seen and Lore would find Seren unbelievably adorable, then they'd date and realize they're totally compatible and shalala happily ever after lol I'm working on the update for The Lonely Ones so hoping to get that out before the month is up. Oh, and you'll still get your usual Wednesday update!

82. An Unexpected Truth

The day waiting in the capital is primarily spent in my room where my silent treatment against Lore continues. He knocks in the morning to remind me breakfast is ready in which I ask a butler to bring it to my room. Then Lore knocks around nightfall to remind me that we're leaving early tomorrow. I never answer and he never barges in, which is somewhat surprising. I don't have the patience to deal with him right now. My head's a mess, so this silence continues to the morning where we get ready to board the ship to Silra. Draven calls us a car where I sit in the front and Lore, begrudgingly, sits alone in the back. Call me petty, I don't care.

At the airship station, everything is a mess. People move chaotically to catch their airship. We get to ours without issue. Lore makes his third attempt to speak to me when we drop our luggage off in our rooms.

"There appears to be a musical this evening in the opera house. Do you want to attend?" he asks, holding up the pamphlet from his bedside table.

I don't answer and head for the door. Lore grasps my wrist, tugging me gently towards him. "Seren," he says, brows furrowed. "How much longer will you keep this up?"

I smile at him. He frowns. His hand drifts down my wrist in an attempt to grasp my hand. I pull away and grab the door knob. Lore steps closer, obviously intent on following me. I send a glare over my shoulder.

"We're meant to stick together," he says.

I break my silence to point out, "That only applied on our way to Vexsis."

"Priests were attacked on our way there. There could be trouble on the way home."

"There is a much easier way to do this than by following me around all day. You can just be honest with me and the problem will be solved."

Lore's eyes darken. "I think that will only cause more problems."

"And not telling me isn't causing more problems?" I argue, shoving my shoulder against his chest to force him a few steps back. "I'm tired of being lied to, Lore."

"Some lies are necessary."

"Don't give me that shit," I growl, clenching my hands into fists. "You've tried to make me see the church's lies for months. Now that I finally have, you're going to lie to me too."

He averts his gaze, teeth grinding behind his lips.

"I don't need that right now, not after going to Trinia and running into Jakoby."

Lore raises a curious brow.

"He acted as if he didn't even know me, so he's hiding something!" My voice raises higher and higher until my throat starts to ache. "Olere, my greatest idol all my life, may know about what the church is doing. I hope that he doesn't because I can't have every damn thing pulled out from under me. Why can't I have anyone honest in my life? Am I undeserving of the truth?!"

"Seren," he whispers, reaching towards me.

I refuse his attempt at comfort. "Out of everyone, I thought you would be honest. You've always been blunt with me. You don't hold back, but you're holding back now when I really need you not to. Why don't you understand that?"

"It isn't that I don't understand," he says softly, blue eyes brimming with concern. "I want to be honest, but I... I do not know how you will react to these secrets and..."

Lore looks out of place. I've never seen him like that, like he isn't sure what to say or do. He always has a remark to give, always acts in whatever way

he sees fit, but not now. He stands before me flexing his hands at his sides like that will conjure the words evading him.

"And?" I ask, approaching him to rest my hands on his arms. I feel the tension, the way his biceps strain and shoulders roll.

Heaving a long breath, he says, "And I do not doubt that many, including you, may not like what I have hidden. You may leave if you learned all my truths."

"Lore, I've recently learned the institution that raised me, that was meant to love me, has done nothing but make my life and the lives of others absolutely miserable. What could you tell me that would be worse than that?"

He doesn't respond for a long moment before whispering, "You may be surprised."

I don't know what to say, so I try to ease him. "I'm not going anywhere. I don't want to. I want this. I want to be with you."

Lore leans forward to rest his forehead against mine. I slip my arms around his neck, bringing him in for a kiss that he eagerly responds to. He lays a gentle hand on my neck, retreating to whisper against my lips, "There is one that I can speak of here, that may... determine what more I will say."

Meaning he isn't telling me everything now. I can't say I'm crazy about that, but Lore appears genuinely troubled.

"Fine, I won't push you if it bothers you so much, but I am not alright with being lied to. I won't wait around forever for your honesty, do you understand?" I ask, knocking my head against his. He releases a soft chuckle and nods. Taking my hand, he guides me towards his bed where we both take a seat.

"This may feel strange for a moment," he says, puzzling me. Lore keeps a tight hold on my hand where a peculiar sensation overtakes me. I gaze at

our connection; a golden light, my magic, swirls around our hands, then twists as a snake would up Lore's arm... he's absorbing my magic.

"You can't--" Lore holds up a finger to silence me. I try to break our connection, worried that he may harm himself. What happened with Ikehn, he explained that he can absorb magic only if he pushes it right back out. Why is he waiting? Releasing me, Lore holds up his hand where the veins that once hummed a soft gold dull. The minutes tick away and I grow anxious.

"You said you have to release the magic immediately. What are you doing?" I ask, grasping his hand.

Then Lore holds out his hand with his palm pointing skyward and whispers a soft incantation that I've heard before-- *that I've used before* . Fire lights in his palm, hovering around his hand with a dull red color to it; magic.

"How did you... dhampir cannot use magic," I whisper, gazing at the flames that don't look quite right. They don't feel right either. It doesn't have the same sense of divinity, as if the color isn't the only thing that is dulled. I reach towards the flames, almost expecting this to be an illusion, but Lore retreats.

"Don't burn yourself to test if this is real," he says. He nods towards the pamphlet on his bedside table. Grabbing it, I push the pamphlet towards the flames that burn the paper. The flames burn as they should once catching fire to the pamphlet, which I toss into the trash to smother.

"How are you doing this? Vampires and dhampir cannot produce mana. They don't have the reserves for it either. I don't..." My words fall short when I notice the flames sputter like a fire pit without kindling. A few seconds later, the flames grow smaller, then disappear into nothing. When Lore whispers the incantation again, the flames do not reappear. I look into his eyes, more confused than ever.

"You're right that vampires and dhampir cannot produce mana. Mortals evolved to create and use mana while we did not. It is also true that most of us, the large majority of us, cannot possess or use magic," he explains.

"However, the night I killed Belroe, I survived because I accidentally absorbed his mana to such an extreme that I almost killed him with the blowback. I likely would have died had I not released the mana so swiftly, but it got me wondering; if my trait is power absorption, I must have a reserve for that power just like mages have a reserve for mana, correct?"

"Potentially."

"I thought perhaps I could use that reserve to store mana I have absorbed to use later."

"But there have been other vampires with power absorption traits and this has never happened, has it?" I argue, trying to understand the impossible. This isn't a truth I could have ever guessed that Lore had been hiding.

"None that I have heard of or found, but that doesn't mean they were the same as me. I have met those who can absorb only certain kinds of energy or they must use what they absorb immediately. There's also the fact that I am not a full blooded vampire. I am half mortal, so would I not have a better chance of using mana?"

I almost can't believe it even after witnessing it. Recalling the flames, the strange sensation and color, I ask, "Why did it look different? The fire was dull and the magic felt...off."

"Because the mana is not mine, that's all I can guess. When you cast a spell, the magic lingers as if it's alive. When I cast, there's nothing left. Seeing as there is no research on this, I've hypothesized that once I've absorbed mana it dissipates differently as it no longer belongs to only one mage. I could be entirely off base, but it's the one conclusion I can think of."

He's right. I've cast spells to search for mages, seeking the magic they left behind. A trained mage can find another through their magic, it's connected to us, but I don't feel that same connection with Lore. This worries me though.

"Are there no side effects?" I ask, inspecting Lore's hand. He doesn't feel hot to the touch. There aren't any burn marks, but that doesn't relieve my

anxiety. "What if you kept the mana for too long and it harmed you?"

"There were many issues in the beginning. As I told you before, the bones in my hands and arms shattered once. This actually happened shortly after Belroe's death. I actually had to tend to the wound myself and I became much more careful. Now I can keep mana in reserve for as long as I wish, although I will never have the amount that you do. I've casted continuously for about two hours and that's all."

"That's still very impressive for someone who isn't meant to cast at all."

Linking our fingers, Lore smirks. "I do like when you compliment me." Then he bites his bottom lip and says, "I do wish for you not to speak of this to anyone."

"Does anyone else know?"

"Draven does. That's all."

That surprises me. I expected Arline and Cyan to know.

As if Lore can read my mind, he says, "I trust Cyan and Arline, but the best way to keep such a secret is to hide it from even those that you trust. I am telling you because I do not want to lie to you either, Seren. I do not wish to upset you."

"I understand. I won't tell anyone. Honestly, who would even believe me if I did?" I ask, making Lore chuckle. Using our hand hold to tug him closer, I wrap an arm around his shoulders to bring him into my embrace. He rests against me, sighing as if a heavy weight has been lifted from him. He slips an arm around my waist and presses a chaste kiss to my neck that sends a shiver down my spine. That shiver lingers there for a long moment, shifting to an anxiety as a thought drifts across my mind; *Does this not point to Lore being the serial killer the church was searching for?*

A dhampir mage, something that shouldn't exist and no one knows how to look for would be the perfect killer. Of course I've never found proof, but I never realized the dhampir I've been watching has the abilities that I do, that

he can hide himself right under my nose with a power I don't quite understand.

"You're grown tense," he says, sounding dejected. He veers back, forcing me to release him. Solemn eyes gaze upon me as he fidgets in place. "You're suspicious, aren't you?"

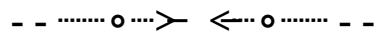
I don't want to lie to him either, even if it means saying something he won't like. "Yes, I am. You're hiding a lot more than you let on, always have. How can I not be suspicious? Although I guess this does explain why you didn't want to tell me."

He nods and tries to pull his hand away. I hold tighter, making him glance curiously at me, like he honestly thinks I don't want him near me anymore.

"Thanks for telling me. I know it wasn't easy and you better know that I'm still not going anywhere. You said I could stick around so you're stuck with me." I offer a smile that he returns, the soft and authentic smile that makes my toes curl.

"I wouldn't want to be stuck with anyone else," he whispers, squeaking cutely in surprise when I yank him in for a kiss to really make sure he understands.

After this, I really don't know what else to expect from Lore. I'm still not sure if I understand this, but I want to know his secrets. I want to be someone he can confide in. Whatever he has to tell, I want to listen and learn and be with him for as long as I can.



Wowza, this is a big deal. Lore can actually use magic and it's seemingly untraceable. Is Seren right to have his suspicions? What else could Lore be hiding? Will Seren really stick around even after learning everything?

I'd really like to talk about Lore using magic! When I came up with the concept that mortals can use magic because they evolved to do so while

vampires cannot, I did begin to ask myself what happened with dhampir. I wanted to go with a vibe that dhampir cannot use magic either, but only because there hasn't been enough tests done. No one wants dhampir to use magic and mortals like that separation, that dhampir are more vampire than human. There are definitely more dhampir in the world who COULD use magic based on if they have mana reserves, but they'd have to actually be taught to use it and still have less than mortals. Lore is a rare case because his trait actually assists in that and opened his eyes to the possibility. I think in a few centuries dhampir on earth would evolve more to use magic more frequently, but right now it's obviously not even considered a possibility.

83. New Fluffy Friends

"Here I thought you forgot about this," Lore says from where he stands in front of the animal adoption center in Nosa. Cyan and Draven stand behind us, both equally confused.

"We're getting an animal?" Cyan asks. I take note of how his fingers wiggle at his side. He shoves them in his pockets, feigning disinterest regardless of how his eyes sparkle. "I thought His Grace didn't want the kids begging for a dozen of them."

"I tried explaining this to Seren, but he insists that we get a dog." Lore's words make Draven scowl.

"Not a dog person?" I ask the butler.

"Not when I know I will be the one cleaning up after that dog and all the other animals that will inevitably follow." Draven crosses his arms. I swear I see him reworking his daily work schedule to adjust everything to a pet until I pat his shoulder.

"Don't worry, we're going to work with the kids so they can become responsible with the dog." I swing open the door and step inside. When I hear the dogs barking, my fingers twitch too. I won't lie; I've wanted a pet ever since I was a kid. A dog to play fetch with or a cat to cuddle up with by a warm fire. We didn't have them at Trinia. Kids honing their magic plus pets pointed towards potential disaster. I never got one of my own because I lived in the barracks, so this is kind of a big deal for me too.

Inside, there's a small waiting room with a couple of chairs. In front of the door, there's a long counter with a few purchasable pet items and brochures on food or training centers. Two doors are open behind the counter, one obviously leading towards the kennels where the dogs bark and a few cats meow. The other door might lead to a supply room or offices, seeing as a man a few years younger than me steps out of there.

"Good afternoon My Lords," he says, standing tall at the counter. "I'm Harrigan, how may I help you today?"

"We're hoping to adopt a dog that is good with children," I reply, trying to keep my voice level, which isn't working because Lore leans towards me.

"Are you sure we're getting a dog for the children and not for you?" he whispers against my ear. Smiling, I push him away.

"Great, we've got quite a few that would do really well with children. If you would wait here, I can bring out a few for you to get to know." Harrigan gestures at the sitting area. He disappears towards the kennels after we take a seat. Cyan stands around the counter poking through the toys because, apparently, even dog and cat toys pique his scientific interest.

"We're only getting one," Lore says beside me, although his serious expression softens when I take his hand. His gaze drifts around the center, hesitating on Cyan's back then shifting to Draven. The butler has certainly noticed our connection, though makes no verbal mention of it.

"I told you, I just want to be careful around the kids, but here we can..." I interlock our fingers, sharing a smile that makes Lore release a rare bashful laugh. He holds my hand tighter, informing me that I can convince him to get two dogs, if I want to.

Moments later, Harrigan and an older woman with slightly graying hair steps into the room. The woman has a dog on a leash that looks as equally excited to see us as she is. Harrigan remains behind the counter while she walks into the waiting area.

"Lord Seymour," she says, approaching us with the dog that I immediately kneel to meet. "It's such a pleasure to have you here. I'm the owner of this center, Marigold Tenner."

She continues speaking to Lore about doing everything she can to ensure he finds a great addition to the family. And I think Harrigan wants to be a new addition too because he has his attention on Cyan. I take notice of how the worker leans against the counter, smiling charmingly at Cyan's slowly

reddening expression. The scientist shifts his weight from one foot to the other, visibly unsure of how to respond to Harrigan's obvious flirtation. But then his lips slip into a smile and he laughs. My curiosity gets the best of me; I look at Draven. He stands tall, hands set firmly behind his back with an almost expressionless face. Almost being the word one should focus on. There's a darkness to his normally vibrant orange eyes and the slightest twitch of his lips that strain to prevent a frown. Suddenly, his gaze softens. He stares at the floor, shoulders slumped forward as if he has admitted defeat before even trying.

My attention strays to Marigold when she takes the dog to hand off to Harrigan. He sends Cyan a wink that makes him freeze then stare at the counter cluelessly. Harrigan retrieves one dog after another until a golden retriever comes trotting into the room with a tail fluffier than a feather duster.

"Oh, not Bailey," Marigold says. "I don't want to separate her."

"From who?" I ask, intrigued by the golden sweetheart that sits almost daintily at Harrigan's side.

"Bailey's family had a sudden move and were incapable of taking their pets. The owners brought two cats in with them and I would rather not separate the three if I have to."

"How are the cats with children?"

Lore gently knocks his foot against my thigh. I ignore it.

"Great, they came from a family with a three year old and a seven year old," Marigold replies.

I look at Lore, who stares back at me. He furrows his brows, shakes his head, then groans when I eagerly nod. Lore sighs. "Bring the cats out."

Harrigan hands Bailey's leash to me so I can give her the chin scratches she deserves. Harrigan returns to the counter to talk to Cyan. I'm about to get up

to speak with Draven about the jealousy he's clearly showing when Lore beats me to it.

"You're making a strange face," Lore whispers, bringing Draven's attention to him.

Draven cocks a brow. "I beg your pardon?"

Lore nods towards Cyan, but keeps his attention on Bailey, who has come to rest her head in his lap. He scratches Bailey's ears while saying, "You aren't required to always be the perfect butler. There's nothing wrong with seeking what makes you happy outside of work. In short, it won't kill you to act like you have a heart every now and again."

I pinch Lore's leg. This time he ignores me. Draven, however, watches Lore for a drawn out moment. Heaving a breath, he glances towards Cyan, who has picked out a few toys that he speaks to Harrigan about. If the worker was trying to flirt, I think he has failed and he is now stuck explaining the toy's mechanisms to Cyan. Draven surprises both of us by moving towards the counter to join them.

"And here I thought you were somehow oblivious to what was happening between those two," I mumble, glancing at Lore.

He rolls his eyes. "They've been like this for the last three years. It's exhausting."

"You've never brought that up?"

Lore purses his lips, then shrugs. "Initially, I thought it would be strange if I mentioned anything, particularly Draven. He has always been a stubborn perfectionist, which I never complained about as he seemed to take joy out of his work."

"But?" I urge.

"But," he smiles at me. "They are making me want to rip my hair out and I love my hair too much to risk that."

He and I laugh just as Marigold returns with a cat carrier. She sets it on the ground and opens the door to release a white cat as fluffy as Bailey's tail and rather confident because the cat saunters out like it owns the place. The second one is a calico cat with big golden eyes that doesn't stray far from the carrier.

"What do you think?" I ask Lore, picking up the white cat that Marigold claims is called Sir Biscuits because he likes to make biscuits, as I soon learn when he starts doing that on my thighs. Oh, this is so wonderful. My insides are turning into mush! The calico one is Missy and she takes a liking to Draven, or at least an interest because she sniffs his shoes and tries to bite the laces. Surprisingly, he doesn't shoo her away.

"I think we came here for one pet and we're about to leave with three," Lore replies.

"Implying that you've accepted your fate and I don't need to make an argument for why we should take all three?"

Lore squishes Bailey's face a bit in his hands, staring down at her wide brown eyes. "I guess they're... all very cute."

"Mhm."

"The kids will be happy to have them."

"Uh huh."

"And you will be too, so I guess I don't have any other choice." He looks at Marigold. "We'll take all three."

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We return to Seymour Estate with twice the amount of luggage than what we left with, although a decent amount of that luggage has to do with a bouncy golden retriever and her fluffy meowing friends. Cyan carries a box of items for our new additions; toys upon toys that he thoroughly discussed with Harrigan to ensure the best quality.
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Draven opens the doors and sets our luggage aside. A few maids scurry over to retrieve them, both staring in awe at the pets. They giggle during their departure. Lore makes a few quick notes to us that we'll introduce the kids to the pets one at a time so as to not overwhelm the animals. Cyan, Lore, and I take the pets and their belongings to their own room so they can adjust to their new surroundings. Just in time too because the children's voices echo in the floor below calling for their Papa. Lore steps out of the room and gives me a look that puts a smile on my face.

"This is going to be great, I promise," I tell him, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek. Then we head down the stairs to greet the children.

They rush towards Lore, who kneels in the foyer to meet them. He's smothered in kisses and frantic hugs. The children speak so vehemently that Lore has to remind them that he doesn't have the superpower to decipher what they're saying when they all speak at once. I'm surprised when Nalo, Ashby, Angel, and Oliver actually come over to say hello to me. Nalo hugs my waist. Angel hugs me with Ashby, although I think it's because she wanted to make sure I didn't try anything mean based on her little glare during said hug. Then Oliver holds out his hands to be picked up. He gives me a tight hug that makes me want to melt into a puddle of goo.

"Welcome back, Seren," he says, blinking those big baby blues at me that clearly states the question he's about to ask. "Did you convince Papa to get us a dog?"

I bite my lip and look over his shoulder at Lore. He's telling them a bit about our trip. I look back at Oliver and grin. He breaks into a wide smile. "Really? Really, really? Papa got us a dog?"

"Why don't you go ask him?" I sit Oliver down. I've never seen someone move so fast. He practically teleports to Lore's side, tugging eagerly on his jacket. Lore leans over, smiling when Oliver whispers in his ear. Lore's gaze meets mine and he shakes his head.

"I do have an announcement to make," Lore says, probably pausing for dramatic effect or because he finds it humorous how Oliver bounces like a jackrabbit. "There are some furry friends upstairs--"

The kids start screaming.

"Who you will meet one at a time."

The kids groan.

"We do not want to overwhelm them."

"You said friends and them," Darika remarks. "How many are there?"

"Three. A dog and two cats."

The kids squeal and giggle amongst themselves. That excitement grows even more when Lore guides them upstairs. I keep a few steps behind, watching and listening to the children meet our furry additions one at a time. Lore goes into the room with each kid for a few minutes, then comes out to get the next. After Oliver's turn, he comes running over to hug my legs rather tightly for such a small guy.

"Thanks, Seren," he says, showing a toothy grin. "We're gonna love them so much and-and we're gonna make them really happy, I promise."

I ruffle his golden curls, chuckling. "I'm sure you will."

The worries about the church, even Lore's remaining secrets, remain at the back of my mind. Stress can't even ruin this moment of watching the kids cheer and Lore eagerly speaking to them. He sits on the floor, uncaring of the expensive suit that he'd complain about getting dirty if anyone else were to make him sit on a floor. Here, he doesn't care. He just hugs his kids and listens to them tell exaggerated stories of their playdates.

This is what I wanted, this warmth of a home. A real one that maybe I can be a part of too.

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To those celebrating, Merry Christmas! Happy Holidays! To those who aren't, I hope you still benefit from good food LOL Get them leftovers, save on some money for meals. Stay safe and warm everyone. Anywho,

Seren has succeeded in getting the kids a dog and two cats lol Lore also gave Draven a little push towards Cyan. Our big happy family is getting even bigger and more loving! Will Seren be accepted into the home by everyone, including the kids?

84. Confessions

Cyan POV

"I can't believe Seren convinced His Grace to get not one, but three pets. Something serious happened between them while you were gone, didn't it?" Arline asks from where she sits on the couch in the lounge. I take a seat on the opposite side, turning so the arm of the couch presses into my back.

"Yeah, it seems His Grace is serious about him and Seren must feel the same. He left the church," I explain, expecting Arline's surprised expression.

"He did?"

"Turned everything in while we were in the capital."

"I suppose I didn't see his axe," she mumbles to herself. "I wouldn't be surprised if the church retaliates."

"How?"

"Who knows. Maybe they'll send a few priests claiming we're harboring some vampiric knowledge that brainwashes their already brainwashed brethren?" Arline shrugs. "You never know what their lot will do, just that they're capable of anything." Before I can say anything, Arline leans towards me to ask, "Enough about them, what happened with you?"

I feel a flush burning beneath my cheeks that I wish I could fight back because it makes Arline smirk.

"What happened between you and Draven?" she asks, grinning ear to ear.

"Why would you ask that?"

"Because you immediately blushed, which means Draven is included."

Crossing my arms, I shrug. "Nothing happened. We worked, like we were meant to."

"But there had to be moments when you weren't working."

"Draven's always working."

"You being so adamant about nothing happening enforces that something did." She sits back and waves her hand in a come hither manner. "Tell me. I'll figure it out eventually."

That is likely true...

I eye Arline skeptically. She creates a false expression of security, like she won't be thrilled to hear my answer. I glance towards the doors leading to the hall as if I expect someone to be there, Draven specifically. Last we saw him, he was speaking with some workers about obtaining toys, dog food, cat food, everything we need for our furry friends. We grabbed what he could fit with our luggage today, but it won't last long.

"So?" Arline calls, bringing my attention back to her.

"We spent a day in town. Draven gave me a tour," I say, making sure not to mention what happened during the tour though Arline surely can't miss my accelerated heart race. Remembering the feeling of his hand around mine, the warmth of his body near me, how I wish that could be my norm, that I could actually achieve these feelings regularly.

"A tour," she echoes. "So you went on a date?"

I bite my lip. "No--"

"Saying you spent a day together in town while your heart's racing that fast, yeah, it was a date."

"You know that I don't have dates."

"But you did have one, with Draven no less, and I bet if you actually asked him about it, he'd say it was a date too."

That makes me laugh, at least until the doors swing open and a familiar face steps in. I freeze on the couch, staring at Draven's brilliant orange gaze. His attention lingers on me for a moment, then drifts to the grinning Arline.

"I see that the two of you are already catching up, although we have plenty of unpacking to do," he says.

"You two have plenty of unpacking to do," Arline corrects. Standing, she keeps her back to Draven while mouthing to me *'you had a date with Draven.'* I kick her in the thigh. She grunts and scurries away, speaking to Draven when she walks by, "Since you're obviously here to give us a lecture, I'm leaving. Have fun unpacking."

The door swings shut behind her. Draven sighs and shakes his head, but in a totally caring manner. They have been here at the estate far longer than I have. He's more accustomed to her than I am.

"Are you actually here to whine about unpacking because, seriously, we just got back." I push myself off the couch and hold my hands up in defeat. "I think it will be okay if I don't unpack until tomorrow."

"No," he says, hesitating for a strangely long moment. "Actually, I was hoping to... speak with you."

I don't know why, but his tone makes my toes curl. "Oh? Uh, okay. I haven't blown anything up already, if you're worried about something so nonsensical."

"It isn't so nonsensical when it happens so regularly."

I roll my eyes, expecting Draven to speak up, but he's silent. That silence puts me on edge, albeit not in a frightful way. Draven normally always knows what to say and what he wants to say, but this feels different. Opening his mouth one moment, then closing it the next. His gaze shifts through the room like he expects his words to appear. The unfamiliar mannerisms are strange, minimal compared to most people, but glaringly obvious to those who know Draven never acts less than perfect.

"Would it... would it be alright if I considered it a date?" Draven whispers so softly I can't believe I heard him.

"W-What?"

He takes a step closer, just one, and repeats, "Our day in town, is it alright if I want to think of it as a date?"

That bitch Arline put me in a headlock and choked me into a coma, didn't she? There's absolutely no way Draven would say this in real life. This can only be a dream, a very, very warped dream from a desperate mind.

But this dream continues. There's no sudden darkness or laughter from my conscience; there's only us. Draven stands a few steps in front of me, hands behind his back like the butler he is, but I see the tension in his arms and shoulders. Even through that tension, he doesn't take his eyes off me. The shimmering orange as fierce as fire prevents me from escaping.

What is this? What's happening? What do I say? I... he can't...

I'd claim he's pranking me, but this is Draven. That isn't what he does, which means he's serious. The idea is both exciting and terrifying because what am I meant to do? I like Draven. I've liked him for a while and I do--I wish we could have something, but... no, no he isn't serious. He can't. We can't. I don't understand.

"This is a really bad joke," I bite, shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

"I assure you that this is no joke," he says firmly, not as the perfect butler but as a man who makes my heart palpitate.

The room feels too small. I'm forgetting how to breathe. Every breath feels too little then too much. My skin itches. My mind's reeling, imagining Draven's devilish sneer, his mocking voice as if it's helping right now. As if it has happened a thousand times before. They're ridiculous thoughts, I try telling myself that, but the panic surges harder than a storm deep at sea.

"You know what you're asking, Draven," I mumble. I tear into the end of my shirt, twisting the fabric around my fingers so tightly they go numb. "A date--I--even if I say yes, even if I did think of it as a date, it doesn't matter. I can't give you what you're looking for."

"How do you know what I'm looking for?" he argues, sounding a little breathless. It makes my heart sing. That song grows louder when Draven approaches me.

"I know what you're working through, Cyan, but I've grown tired of avoiding the truth. I found it unfair to approach you with romantic intentions because I didn't want to overwhelm you, but now I realize I made that as an excuse to avoid the chance of losing you entirely. However, if I don't say this now, I may lose you one day because you have far more to give than you realize and other knows that especially well, so..." He takes a long breath that I mirror, somehow unprepared even when I know what he's about to say. "I like you, Cyan. I care for you more than I ever thought I could for anyone. I do not expect an answer now as I know I sprang this on you, but if you feel the same then I would like to give us a try."

I don't know how to reply.

Draven offers a soft, almost embarrassed smile that makes me swallow hard because, fuck, I didn't think Draven knew how to be cute. But he is and it makes me wonder who else has seen him like this. Is it only me? Is it greedy for me to hope it has only been me?

Draven retreats to the doorway. With his hand against the frame, he looks over his shoulder and, as he does, returns to his usual lecturing, "Don't think of belittling yourself either. I understand what you're going through. If you haven't noticed already, I'm very patient."

That makes me laugh. Draven smiles. The door closes behind him, leaving me standing among the aftermath of his--holy shit--confession. This might have been something I've dreamed about. Many dreams aren't ever seen as realistic possibilities though. Now I don't know what to do.

I know what I want to do. I want to run after him and tell him that I like him too, that I want to give us a try, but my legs won't take me. My hands shake. The room sways. My lungs ache for air. There's a chain digging into my skin, preventing me from escaping the prison I've been in for most of my life. I wish to be free of it, but I don't know how.

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OH SNAP! Draven has confessed. Cyan's panicking about it. Will he be able to accept Draven's feelings or will he be too frightened to take that next step? If you must know, you can join my patreon and if you stick around through January you'll get to read my new story Out of the Office Romance before it posts anywhere else ^_^

85. The Butler & The Troublemaker

Cyan POV

Time ticks away. I remain on the couch doing what I do best; think.

I don't know how much time passes before Arline returns. Likely hours passed based on the sun being up when Draven was here and now the sun has set. It must be after dinner because Arline steps in with a plate of food. Her brows furrow when she huffs, "I've been searching everywhere for you. What are you still doing here? You missed..."

Her voice trails off. Setting the plate on the coffee table, she takes a seat next to me. Her hand rests on my shoulder, gently nudging me. "What's wrong? You're as pale as the dead."

I tear at the fraying strings along the edge of my shirt that I've abused ever since Draven's *confession* . The poor cloth will have to be tossed after tonight. Looking at Arline, I try to tell her but the truth sits on the edge of my tongue. I know what she's going to say; that I should tell Draven how I feel. That's what she has always said. Arline has always believed in our connection, and I always wanted to feel the same. That's much easier to do when you're not at war with your own body, when your mind rests at ease. What's that like having a quiet mind, not being anxious, not hating yourself?

"Cyan," Arline whispers. Her eyes hold concern. I don't blame her. I'm acting weird.

Swallowing hard, I manage to breathe out, "I... Draven, after you left he, uh, he said that he l-likes me."

I'm baffled to discover Arline maintaining a serious expression. I expected a knowing smirk, maybe a taunt, but she sits calmly. Resting a gentle hand on my back, she asks, "Did he say anything else?"

"He said he doesn't expect an answer now, but if I feel the same then he'd like to give us a try and that I shouldn't belittle myself. He'll wait."

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Because you want to take time to think about it?"

"I guess? I don't know. I-I know that I like him too, but..."

Arline frowns. "But you're worrying about it again, aren't you? That he'll get annoyed with waiting or that you'll never give him the physical aspects of a relationship that he may want."

Of course she knows, we've gone over this hundreds of times. I've tried getting accustomed to physical contact and I have gotten better. Arline, for example, can touch my shoulder or grasp my hand and I'm fine. We practiced first, doing chores together while she held my hand or gently patted my arm while we spoke. Little things here or there that amounted to normalcy, but it took time. A lot of time. Same with Lore. Sometimes he had to hold me to calm me, but then I'd break out in hives because of the contact.

Draven though, it feels more complicated with him because he makes my heart race. I know what I want to do. I want to hold his hand. I want to hug him. I want to kiss him. I want... to have sex. It's not like I don't have that drive. I most certainly do, but part of me hates that and another part knows that's stupid. I become so irritated that I can't react so easily to these desires. I want Draven and he's right there and yet I can't reach him. It makes me hate myself.

"Hey, look at me," Arline whispers, taking firm hold of my hand. "I understand why you're worried. I understand that this is a lot for you, but if

being with Draven is what you want then you have to give it a try. Yes, it'll take time for your relationship to develop, more than it does for most others, however, that's what a relationship is. If you aren't willing to spend time together, to be patient, to learn, to grow comfortable, then they aren't the person for you."

Arline nudges me playfully with her elbow. "Hell, how many years did he wait to say this? Not to mention that he puts up with all of us without having a complete breakdown. If anyone can put up with your crazy ass, it's Draven."

"True. I am a handful," I laugh, taking a relieved breath. "I just... I always feel like I'm not enough and Draven will eventually see that, then everything will be ruined."

"Aren't all relationships like that?" she argues. "The fear of losing an important relationship by taking the next frightening step happens to everyone. Sometimes there is loss, but sometimes we get so much more. We have to ask ourselves if that's worth the risk and if, when our time is up, will we regret never taking that chance?"

Smiling, she pushes my dinner plate closer to me. "Take some time to eat and ask yourself what you will regret most. You'll come to a decision." With that, she pats my thigh and leaves.

My stomach rumbles. I reach for my plate while it's still warm and stuff my face wondering over Arline's question.

What will I regret more; saying no or saying yes? I feel I already know the answer. All this time, I've been running around Draven wishing for him to care for me in the same way I do for him while also completely terrified of the prospect. My life will continue like this, always wanting a relationship while berating myself for being incapable of fulfilling the aspects of it that I legitimately want. If I run now, I'll continue running the rest of my life. I'm tired of running. I want to be brave. I want to stand my ground and take a chance.

I want to take a chance with Draven and see where that chance takes us.

I don't know how late it is and I don't really care. If I don't do this now, I'll change my mind so, on trembling legs, I search for Draven. The estate is quiet and dark. My breath catches around every corner, hoping to see Draven but only catching a shadow. Even through the endless nerves, my feet become lighter. I'm rushing through the halls and checking the rooms because I'm so out of it that I don't even stop to realize what time it is until I've checked a dozen rooms. Every part of me trembles as I approach Draven's bedroom. My knock is so quiet I barely hear it. I'm about to knock again when the door opens.

My breath catches in my throat seeing Draven standing there in plain trousers and a sleep shirt. It's unlike him. I rarely see Draven in anything other than his uniform. While he's always a looker, I can't deny that seeing his hair unkempt and disheveled makes my mouth run dry.

"Were you asleep?" I whisper, worrying I may have woken someone with my earlier searching.

"No," he answers, gesturing over his shoulder. I catch a glimpse of a book on his bedside table. "I was reading. Trying to anyway."

Because of me? is what I want to ask but don't have the courage to because all that courage is going towards everything else right now.

"Did Arline bring you dinner?" he asks, resting a hand against the doorframe. "You didn't show up so..."

"So you asked her to bring me dinner?"

His grip tightens, then he nods. "I wasn't sure if you wanted to see me yet."

"I... I did, um, I..."

How can I speak when he's looking at me like that? Not a stern expression, something almost hopeful, like the hope whistling through my veins. My gut twists into a knot, as do the strings on the end of my shirt because my fingers won't stop fiddling with them.

"You don't need to say anything until you're ready," he says, noticing my fidgeting.

"No, I need to. If I don't, I'll keep running so," I try at least five times to swallow the lump in my throat before--fucking hell--literally squeaking out, "I-I like you too, Draven."

Pride surges within me having done the impossible; I made Draven blush. Not like how I do where I'm red up to my ears, something softer but still incredibly noticeable across his cheeks. I notice how he holds his breath and it makes me feel like less of a fool for doing the same.

"I'm scared," I admit, continuing to toil with the strings along my shirt. "You know that I haven't... I've never been able to do what most others do so easily. I'm a complete mess in more ways than one and a total troublemaker."

"Yeah, you are," he agrees, smiling sweet enough to make my teeth ache.

"Regardless of that, I still want to give us a try too." I'm happy to say the word makes us both smile. It feels good, like maybe this can work, although, "I don't really know what to do now."

This is the part where the newly formed couple is meant to hug, kiss, or passionately make out, which are all things I would love to do if I could.

Draven glances into his room, then asks, "Are you tired?"

I shake my head.

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

"A walk in the middle of the night?"

"Fresh air is good for you, especially you. I imagine you'll fill the lab up with smoke tomorrow before lunch."

I bite back a giddy smile. "Probably, I grabbed a few things from Vexsis that I'm eager to look over."

His eyes widen.

"Nothing crazy. I might have slipped a watch off someone's wrist, grabbed a pretty neat remote control toy when we were out... and yanked a shiny thing out of one of the car engines."

"Cyan."

"It was little stuff. No one will even notice it's gone!"

Draven rests his forehead against the open door, trying to hold back a smile. But then he lets it slip across his face and I hope this becomes the norm because I really like it when he smiles. It's a little crooked, like he's the one who is about to get into trouble.

"Will you *always* be this much of a troublemaker?" he asks, stepping out of his room to walk beside me down the hall.

"I hope so. It's fun." I gaze at his hand swaying close to mine, then up at him. He tilts his head when I ask, "Can we... hold hands? Just for a minute. I think I can do that."

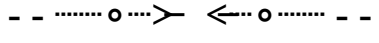
We held hands in town too. By accident, but we did it and I want to do it again.

"This can be the start of our practice," I add.

"Okay," he says, grasping my hand that immediately heats up. He links our fingers and I want to scream with joy. "Practice is all about repetition, so I guess we'll have to do this every night."

Draven steps out into the cool night air, but I've never felt so warm.

"I'd like that," I whisper, clutching his hand tighter and hoping that I really will feel this again tomorrow.



WOO HAPPY NEW YEAR! Wow these fluff episodes are falling on some perfect dates. What a way to start the year, Draven and Cyan are officially dating lol They even managed to hold hands on purpose lol Our boys have a lot to work on, but they'll work on their relationship together :) It's nice to have some relaxing chapters, isn't it? ;)

As a reminder, if you enjoy my writing I do have books available on amazon. Speak the Truth is a trilogy and if the physical version isn't available in your country, the eBook should still be. You don't need a kindle to read it, just any type of program capable of reading eBooks. Look for Speak the Truth Twoony on amazon! ^^ And keep your eyes open for future books. I hope to have four more added to amazon this year ;)

86. Someone in the Church

Seren POV

Cyan glares so intensely that I almost expect to be the first explosion of this week. Looking up at him, he doesn't even pretend that he isn't attempting to fire lasers from his eyes. If anything, the attention grows in strength.

"If you wish to melt my brains, there is a spell for that," I mention around a grin. Cyan roll his eyes.

"Why have you been in my lab for the last two weeks that we've been home?" he asks, potentially threatening me with some questionable liquid in a container that he swishes menacingly.

"Because I need a place to think and I would rather not let the children see what I'm working on." I glance at the papers scattered across my makeshift desk. There were some beakers here that I pushed aside, which likely added to Cyan's annoyance, although I'm truly not taking up too much space.

For the last two weeks, I've shifted through my memories for the names of those I've known to *leave* the church. I've written down what I remember concerning their appearance, where they are from, and if we were informed how, why, and where they left. Unfortunately, there isn't much information on that, but I started another pile concerning odd happenings at the church. Priests who paid too much attention to the kids, holy knights being sent on secretive missions, even my own assignments. Being sent to investigate Lore, that was the church's attempt to frame anything they could on him. The Prophet even said it herself, so who else are they looking into and why?

The secrets that Lore still has must concern the church. He knows far more than he's letting on. Even Roemithia brought up the church. I'm the one left unknowing, clueless to the darkness behind the curtain.

"Can't you do this research elsewhere, like in your own room? There is a lock on the door," Cyan grumbles, dripping some of that potentially acidic

liquid into another beaker. A puff of smoke lifts into the air that I hope isn't poisonous.

"There is, but I don't want Lore butting into my research either and he doesn't come out here much. Probably because it smells like smoke and is always a second away from exploding."

"Please, nothing has blown up for a week. I'm--" the jar in his hand shakes. He throws the beaker away in time for it to explode on the other side of the cathedral. He sighs. "Okay, there has been one *minor* explosion. I'm not that bad."

"Uh huh."

"Why don't you want His Grace to see what you're doing?" Cyan glances at the papers. "Are you already searching for a new partner?"

"No, I'm quite happy with the one I have."

Cyan grimaces.

"I'm trying to remember those who, supposedly, chose to leave the church," I mumble. This piques Cyan's interest enough to sit across from me. "I'm trying to recall any questionable instances that may lead to discovering what the church is hiding. I think Lore knows about it too, or at least has an inkling to what is transpiring, but he won't tell me."

"And you're saying that to me because you're hoping I know something and will tell you."

"Do you want a pat on the back for guessing the obvious?"

"With that attitude, if I did know something, I wouldn't tell you just to be an ass." He pushes through a few of my papers, staring at the one with a list of names. "I'm not as involved with His Grace's endeavors as Draven. If anyone knows anything, it would be him."

Setting my elbows on the table, I lean forward to ask, "Why did you start blushing when you mentioned Draven?"

Cyan freezes.

I grin. "Did something happ--gah!" I jolt when Cyan whacks me in the face with a stack of papers.

"We aren't talking about him," he says. "And if you try to, I will throw you out of *my* lab."

"Alright, alright." I hold my hands up in defense since I technically got my answer; with that reaction, something definitely happened.

"What exactly is your plan here?" Cyan sits the papers aside. "You can't just sit here going over your memories forever."

"I can't afford to look into any of them either. After leaving the church to come here of all places, I'm sure they will be keeping their eye on me for some time. If I go to the precinct to request information on anyone from my memories, it risks the church discovering that I'm suspicious of their actions."

"So you don't have a plan?"

"Not really. This happened too fast to come up with one, but I am hoping that Lore will eventually talk to me. Maybe this will help." I grab the papers, pushing them into a pile.

"If he's hiding something, I'm sure he has his reasons and, honestly, you'll get used to it." Cyan waves dismissively then returns to whatever he was working on. When I smell more smoke, I take that as my queue to leave. I haven't been getting much done today anyway. I guess I'll take these papers to Lore and see how he reacts.

Arriving at Lore's office, I find the doors to be locked. That isn't totally unusual, but he made no mention of having visitors today. The jiggling of the handles causes Lore to call out, "Who is it?"

"It's me," I answer. "Are you busy?"

"Actually," Lore opens the door. "I was about to come get you."

"Why?" My voice goes quiet upon spotting who sits on Lore's couch; Olere.

"Good afternoon, Seren," Olere says, smiling. "Sorry I didn't notify you that I'd be coming here. It was rather urgent and I..." His attention shifts to Lore, then back to me. "I didn't want to risk any troubling parties finding out."

"Troubling parties meaning who?" I ask, shuffling into the room. Lore immediately shuts and locks the door. "Why are you here? I'm happy to see you so soon, but when did you get here? What... is something wrong?"

"You could say that," Lore answers, walking around me to take a seat on the couch across from Olere.

I drop next to Olere, searching his eyes for an answer.

"I arrived about an hour ago. I did ask to see you, but Lord Seymour was apprehensive about my intentions," Olere explains. I almost sent Lore a glare purely because this is Olere and I trust him with my life, however, I understand Lore's concerns.

"We've talked and I've proven that I am not here to start trouble. At least, not in the way he might have suspected," Olere finishes.

"That doesn't sound too good though," I mumble, looking towards Lore when he rises. He approaches his desk where he grabs a stack of papers. He hands them to me before turning to the opposite couch.

"Look at them," Olere says, tapping the papers. As I open them, he goes on to speak, "You've been asking strange questions lately, Seren, albeit warranted ones. They've made me suspicious as well, or rather lit a fire under old suspicions I once had so I... I looked into them, the children who left the church. As discreetly as I could over the past few weeks."

Flipping through the pages, I find one missing person's report after the other. A few suspicious deaths in the mix too, all of them mentioning friends or family who brought up that their deceased loved one openly condemned the church in very public settings. A blistering storm rages

within me. The wind howls in my ears. The ice freezes my blood. My thoughts cease as it takes all my willpower to listen to Olere.

"Many are missing and the church has done the bare minimum to nothing at all. Some are even dead and, frankly, I cannot pass this off as coincidence. If this is all that I've found in such a short time, imagine what I will learn with a year of research," he says in a deep voice I've never heard before. "There is no proof that the church is behind any of these incidents, but there is nothing to disprove their involvement either. Truthfully, I fear bringing this up to the Council."

"As you should," Lore interjects. There's a chill to his eyes that I recognize; it's a look he frequently gave me when I first arrived here. Olere may have been granted entrance to the estate, but he hasn't earned Lore's trust. I doubt he would have let Olere in at all if he didn't mean so much to me.

"The church is involved," Lore states, making Olere and I flinch because, even with this evidence, neither of us want to believe that. Even after what I've gone through, what I now know, I just don't... I don't want that to be true. It's stupid. I feel ridiculous.

"Do you have proof of their involvement?" Olere asks.

"If I did, I would not share it with you."

"Lore," I hiss. His expression softens when he looks at me.

"I know this man means a lot to you, Seren, which is why I am doing my best to tolerate him. However, he is a champion of the Holy Church. We have no idea who may be watching him right now and no, I do not trust him, so anything I know will not be shared with him."

"I understand that, but can't you be more polite about it?" I grumble, making Lore smirk.

"For you, I will try." He smiles at Olere. "If I did have information, I would not share it with you, *Sir.* "

Olere gives me a look as if to ask 'really, this guy' and it makes me ask myself the same question.

"Is there anyone, any other champion or even the Prophet that you can speak to?" I ask Olere.

"I highly doubt it. The Council will understand why I've done this research. They will see it as a betrayal and we risk revealing to those who may be involved that we're on to them. I didn't even inform the church that I've come to visit you. I requested some time off and claimed to be going fishing," Olere explains, puzzling me. For him to hide that he's visiting me proves how truly concerned he is.

"Olere, I... I saw a man in Vexsis who I recognized," I say, causing Lore to now hiss at me. I ignore his warnings. "This man was a slave to a vampire and I know that I recognized him. He was one of the children from Trinia who spoke against the church. I don't know what's happening, but I truly believe this points towards vampires illegally snatching mages abandoned by the church and the church doing nothing to stop them."

Olere's mouth opens and closes, too shocked to speak. Then his teeth clink when he snaps his jaw closed. "You believe the church to be pretending not to notice."

"Absolutely. Like you said, if you caught this then the church must be aware of this too. They're choosing to turn a blind eye because the children who could stand against them are gone and those who may consider doing so now have something to fear. That fear keeps them quiet."

Olere leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He looks like he's going to be sick, eerily pale and wide-eyed. I rest a hand on his back. I didn't want to hurt him, but it's time for us to face the truth.

"What does Lord Seymour think?" Olere asks, glancing towards the quiet dhampir.

"I know that the church is capable of doing anything to make themselves look better," Lore replies. "Whatever you believe that they won't do, know

that they will."

Olere nods. Silence rests over us long enough for me to look through all the information he brought. When Olere stands, I do too.

"I need to do more digging. Keep those here. They're safe," Olere says, pointing at the papers. "I barely scratched the surface of this, but I have access to the records. I can pinpoint anything strange and look into crimes that may point to abductions, anything."

"Can you look into some of this?" I ask, handing over what I remembered. I point out the names I recalled from Trinia and anything strange I saw at the church. Olere assures me that he'll do what he can.

"I'm sorry," I say, making him raise a curious brow.

"For what?"

"For leaving and dumping all this onto you."

"This is something I needed to see, my boy." He grasps my shoulder, holding tight. "You're doing the right thing and I will help you in whatever way I can." He glances at Lore, who huffs when Olere adds, "I won't help him though. If he wants something it has to come through you."

"I wouldn't ask for your help anyway," Lore grumbles, shrinking a little under my glare.

"Are you really going to leave? Can't you stay tonight?" I ask, ignoring Lore's gaping mouth.

"It'd be best if I actually go fishing. Besides, I wouldn't want to cause anyone discomfort." Olere pats my back and starts heading for the exit. I follow him.

"Thank you for all this."

"There is nothing to thank me for, however," Olere stops at the front door. He looks over my shoulder. I follow his gaze to find Lore waiting in the

hallway, arms crossed. Looking back at Olere, I nervously laugh when he whispers, "I can't say if you've caught yourself a keeper... but he's rich, so that's something."

"He's nice and rather charming once you get to know him."

Rolling his eyes, Olere opens the door. "I'll have to take your word on that."

We're both surprised when Lore calls, "If you wait a moment, I'll call for a butler to drive you where you need to go."

Olere and I stare at Lore in shock.

"If you don't want to, you're welcome to walk," Lore adds, smiling in a way that says he would prefer that.

"I could drive--"

"No," Lore interrupts me. "We have to chat."

"We can chat when I return."

"Eh, don't make him fret too much or he may throw a fit," Olere whispers against my ear. Lore definitely heard it based on his scowl. Huffing, he walks off to call for someone. Moments later, a butler arrives. I'm surprised it isn't Draven. Olere and I say our goodbyes, then he gets in the car and drives off.

"You could have been a bit nicer," I say to Lore.

"I could and should have denied him entrance," he argues.

"But he had very important information that you wouldn't have received if you had been an ass."

"Well, it's a good thing I wasn't a total ass." Lore grasps my hand, tugging me towards him.

"You said we had to chat, will this chat involve more of those secrets you promised me?"

"Yes, but I would feel better if we didn't discuss them immediately," he whispers against my ear. "Just to be safe."

"I suppose I can understand that."

Lore presses a kiss against my neck. "And I think we should take a day before delving further into this."

"Take a day?" I repeat, retreating to look curiously at him.

"I have some work to attend to this afternoon, but I'm fairly free tomorrow." Lore cups my face in his hands. "I was hoping you and I could spend the day with the children."

He must feel my heated cheeks beneath his hands. "I, that, um..."

"We need them to get used to seeing us together," he adds. "I don't like lying to them."

"I know, but they... what if they don't... will it be weird?"

"We played with them together before."

"Under entirely different circumstances."

"Don't worry over it so much," he says, taking my hand to guide me towards his office. "We'll take it slow. No kissing or even holding hands in front of them. Just let them see us together, play together as a family and go from there."

Why does this feel like the hardest thing I'm about to do?

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To anyone interested, my new story, Out of the Office Romance, will post on patreon on January 6th! It won't come out anywhere else until

mid to late February. The first chapter will also be public, so you can follow my patreon without subscribing to read the first chapter and see what you think. You'll also have access to around 15 early chapters for this story as well as extra content. Go to patreon.com/Twoony or follow the external link if you're interested! So Olere came to visit with more troubling information. Lore is going to reveal some more secrets, but Seren has to face the children first! Will this be the hardest thing he has ever done? lol and what is going to happen with the church?

87. Winning the Kids Over

The most difficult trial I will ever face begins now.

"Wha...what are you going to paint, Reegan?" I ask the freckled girl sitting with me in the art room. Isabella draws fairly elaborate clothing designs beside her sister, uncaring of my presence. I'm unclear if that is a good or a bad sign.

"I'm painting a paperweight for Papa," Reegan replies. The paperweight is a rock she must have found outside. She starts painting flowers and butterflies on it, successfully ending our short-lived conversation.

Holy Mothers, help me. I don't know if I can do this.

Across the room, Lore sits with the little ones. Initially, he wanted me to sit with them since Oliver has taken a liking to me, but I can't escape this insistent yammering in the back of my mind that I may frighten Ashby again. Maybe Angel will throw paint at me to protect her brother and everyone will become upset. My panic led to Lore agreeing to keep close to them while I tried spending time with the others. It's not really going well...

Darika has chosen not to paint. She's at the back of the room with Arline sculpting some clay. Apparently, she enjoys that more than painting. Sir Biscuits lays on the counter near them, waiting for a ball of clay to fall so he may play with it. Sir Biscuits has certainly laid claim to the estate. He goes wherever he pleases and has no issues with the children lugging him around. If anything, I think he enjoys the constant attention.

Missy isn't as confident. She hasn't left the second floor, but I've caught her going into the kid's rooms to sleep with them. She doesn't mind laying on the floor either. She simply hasn't mustered the courage to go down the steps yet and we've told the children not to force her.

Nalo and Hyun Woo have taken up residency under the tables, giggling while they scribble on the paper using colored pencils. Suppose it would be

safer for them to have pencils than paint. Especially since Bailey is with them, laying at their sides and licking their faces or hands when they get close enough to do so.

"Are you into fashion, Isabella?" I ask, worried she's ignoring me when she doesn't respond for a drawn out moment.

"Yep," she finally replies. "I want to be a designer. Papa bought me a sewing machine last year for my birthday."

"She made me a really pretty skirt," Reegan added, putting a smile on Isabella's face.

"That's very nice of you. Do you make clothes for all your siblings?" I ask.

Isabella nods. "For Papa, Arline, Cyan, and Draven too. I made Draven socks since he wears his uniform all the time."

"Smart." This time, I managed to end the conversation without meaning to. Isabella and Reegan become focused on their art, leaving me to paint an awful hillside that no one can tell is a hillside. Nalo was the closest by guessing it was a lump of grass. That should explain my artistic abilities.

"This is going terribly," I whisper to Lore after we've moved from the art room to outside. Some of the kids are discussing what game they want to play, allowing Lore and I to speak in private. "I can't keep a conversation with them. I don't know what to do."

"You're thinking about it too much." He chuckles. "And this isn't only about talking to them. Having you around more and allowing them to see you like this," he tugs on my attire, one of the suits we purchased from Vexsis, "will help them grow more accustomed to your presence and maybe even like having you around. Although I have to tell you that you've already won over the little ones."

"R-Really?" I sputter.

"You convinced me to get them pets, Seren. They adore you."

"They adore the pets I helped get."

"If we're being honest, is there really a difference in the eyes of a child? Now, come along, we have games to play." He brushes his hand against mine, momentarily linking our fingers, then releases. I miss the warmth immediately. Heaving a breath to work up my courage, I follow Lore to the center of the yard where the children wait.

We spent the day with the kids as planned. I play the role of a fierce dragon that tries to kill the king (Lore) and am tracked down by the powerful knights (Oliver, Nalo, and Angel.) I'm not sure what it means to play the role of the now dead dragon, but at least I get to lay down for a bit. Playing with the children is more exhausting than any training regime. I don't know where they store all that energy.

After that, I find myself drawing with chalk on the fountain alongside Ashby and Angel. Ashby sits on one side of me scribbling a picture of Missy, I think. At least the colors are accurate and I believe that is a cat. Angel, on the other hand, keeps staring at me.

"Is something wrong? Are you thirsty or hungry?" I ask, looking over my shoulder. "Lunch is about ready, but we can grab a snack."

Angel shakes her head. She scratches the chalk so roughly against the fountain that she almost breaks the chalk. Then she stares at me again. I offer a puzzled smile. Have I done something to offend her? Maybe Ashby got frightened of me again and she feels the need to protect her brother, but then she states, "I don't hate you anymore."

"Oh... that's... okay, that's really good."

"But that don't mean that I like you either!"

"Angel," Ashby whines. He surprises me by sneaking under my arm to sit in my lap. My stomach does flip flops when he makes himself comfortable, deeming my lap an acceptable place to sit while he draws and talks to his sister. "You said you liked him this morning because of the doggy and kitties."

Angel blushes. "I-I did not! I said I liked Bailey and the kitties, not Seren."

Ashby leans his head back so he looks up at me and whispers, "She's lying."

"Am not!"

"Are to!"

This back and forth continues, but I don't mind. Sitting here with them, Ashby in my lap and Angel hugging my arm, likely unknowingly, brings an old but familiar feeling to my chest. It reminds me of my family, my real one. My mom, my dad, and my brother sitting at the kitchen table bickering or snuggling in front of a warm fire on a cold night.

I sense someone watching me. Looking to my right, I discover Lore. Darika's practicing her trait again with Arline's assistance. Lore must have been helping at some point too, but now he has his attention on me. A soft expression rests on his features, something deep and nurturing that makes my toes curl. When he smiles, I lose my breath, then he turns away and I can breathe again. Although I lost my breath a few more times throughout the day, catching Lore's attention here or there and noticing how obviously his affection swims in his eyes.

By the middle of the afternoon, I'm ready for a full night's rest and then some. The kids are returning to class, following Arline from the main house to the school building. However, Hyun Woo has yet to leave my side. He stared at me through most of lunch then quietly followed me around while playing more out in the yard.

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

"Nothing," he says. We fall into a long silence, then I choke on my own saliva when he asks, "Are you and Papa dating?"

"Wha--huh? What, uh, what makes you ask that?"

"You've been staring at him a lot and he has stared at you a lot and I saw him hold your hand earlier, unless maybe you were scared after playing

knights and dragons? I get scared sometimes after playing that and hold Papa's hand too."

I don't know what to say. I could go along with what Hyun Woo's saying, but..."Would it bother you if we were dating?"

Hyun Woo takes his time seriously considering this, going so far as to rest a hand under his chin. His eyes narrow in deep thought, like he's trying to decipher the world's greatest mystery. Then he looks at me and states, "No. Papa seems happy when you're around and I like when Papa's happy, so I think I'd like it if we had two Papa's."

"Oh, that's... that's great, uh, you should hurry after Arline. You don't want to miss your lessons," I say, placing a hand on his shoulder to nudge him gently forward.

"Okay." Hyun Woo hurries down the hall, having easily forgotten our discussion or maybe he wasn't all that interested. I, on the other hand, almost drop to my knees from the overwhelming emotions whistling through me.

Lore and I need to be more careful if the kids are already suspecting us after a mere day of playing with them. Even if Hyun Woo said he would be okay with it, that doesn't mean the other kids will be.

I head to Lore's study where he ran off to after Draven informed him that he had a call. Knocking on the door, I poke my head in to find Lore seated at his desk. He has the phone in one hand and he scribbles on a paper with the other. Sounds like it has to do with one of his businesses, based on what he's saying. Spotting me, Lore smiles and gestures for me to come in. He holds up a finger to signal he'll be another moment so I wait patiently on the couch.

A few moments later, Lore hangs up and asks, "Have the children gone back to class?"

"Yeah, they're with Arline."

"Today wasn't so bad, was it? The kids didn't mind playing with you, so are you feeling any better about them?"

"I... think so? In a way, but earlier, uh, Hyun Woo said he caught us holding hands and asked if we were dating."

Lore snickers. "Leave it to Hyun Woo to notice. He always has a knack of figuring things out that he shouldn't. That's why Cyan had to cast a spell on the locks to the cathedral. He managed to pick the locks before."

"Really?" I laugh. "Where did he learn how to do that?"

"I truly have no idea. That boy should be a detective with how he snoops out any information he's interested in. Probably read about it in a book, but what did you tell him?"

"I asked if it would bother him if we were."

"What did he say?" Lore asks after I've taken a moment too long to continue.

Heat simmers beneath my cheeks. My words come out as a quiet hum, "He said no because you seem happy with me and he likes when you're happy so maybe two Papa's wouldn't be so bad."

Lore's smile shines so brightly it risks rivaling the sun's brilliance. I love seeing him wear such a genuine expression. While Lore smiles often, they're typically in jest or even out of feigned politeness. But at times like this, I get to see that genuine smile that makes my heart sing and wonder if he ever feels the same looking at me. I hope he does out of an almost childish greed to be wanted by him. How hopeless is that?

Standing, Lore quickly approaches to sit beside me. His hand rests on the back of my neck, rubbing soothing circles into my goosebump covered skin. "That's good to hear, isn't it?" he whispers, leaning forward to rest his forehead against mine. "Two Papa's does sound nice."

"That's a bit rash, don't you think?"

"Considering how long you've been dancing around your feelings," he chuckles when I pinch him. "Sorry, I mean how long *we've* been dancing around our feelings, I don't find wanting us to be rash."

Lore catches my lips in a quick kiss making me want to eagerly agree with him. I love it here with him and the kids and this sense of normalcy. A family where we eat together and talk about our days no matter how bland, where we spend the holidays together, and laugh over silly birthday gifts. It's exceedingly wonderful in its simplicity, but...

"Just because Hyun Woo is okay with us doesn't mean the other kids are. I think we need to remain careful."

"We will, but there's nothing wrong with being happy about this. I want you to feel at home here, Seren. I want you to see how much the kids truly adore you and I..." He grows silent, eyes as blue as a clear evening skin. He kisses me again, slow and soothing, but enough to leave me breathless and wanting more. Our lips brush when he adds, "I want you to find the family you really deserve. I admit that I'm incredibly hopeful that you find it here with us."

"I'm pretty sure I already have. I don't know if I'm allowed to be happier than this."

"You are, you absolutely are, and I'm going to show you that there is so much more than this." Lore cups my face, bringing me in for another kiss and another. His body presses against mine, pushing me back onto the couch. I moan against his lips, against the tongue forcing past my lips to eagerly wreak havoc on my senses. I can't get enough of him. I want more and somehow he always gives me that. It almost feels like I'm being spoiled, like this is too much and I don't deserve it, but I refuse to give it away. I don't want these feelings to ever go away.

"Seren," he whispers against my lips.

"Hmm?" I hum, thinking of nothing else than kissing him again. Lore gives into me, letting me kiss him until we're breathless. He retreats to rest en

elbow on the couch beside my head. Hovering above me, I notice a dark tint to his eyes, one that he shows at night when we're lost to each other.

"Can I take the lead this time?" he asks. My heart skips a few beats. My toes curl. He moves forward, rubbing our overheated bodies together. I curse against his lips, groaning when they move down to mark my neck.

"Yeah," I finally answer, shivering when Lore pulls back to smile at me. One of those teasing smiles again, although this one is promising a very long and intense evening, which has me sputtering, "Just, um, it's been a while so..."

"I'll be gentle," he purrs, which doesn't sound convincing. I release an embarrassing squeak when Lore nibbles on my lip, whispering, "Only tonight though."

If I had a thought, they cease to exist when Lore tugs me off the couch with his room as a very clear destination in mind.

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Seren has spent more time with the kids and seem to be winning them over! Hyun Woo likes the idea of having two Papa's, and Lore agrees that sounds quite nice. Do you think the other kids would be okay with Seren and Lore being together? Our boys are so domestic! And yeah, next chapter will be mature lol

88. Driving Him Crazy

Warning: Mature Content. Please keep comments respectful.

Lore locks the door behind us. My lips are on his the moment we're in the clear. I feel his soft chuckle against my lips, a sweet smile that I share. Is it okay to feel like this, like I'm on top of the world?

Lore's arms slip around my waist, holding me close. My heart races, nervous and eager for what's to come. I've typically been the one in the lead in most of my relationships, certainly not from disinterest. I suppose I've never been comfortable enough to hand over control because deep down I always knew the relationships wouldn't last. Now, I'm really hoping this relationship with Lore will last a long, long time... if not forever.

My own thoughts make me blush for reasons Lore certainly doesn't expect. Heat rises, threatening to permanently stain my cheeks. Thankfully, Lore is more fixated on arousing me beyond comprehension to notice. He kisses my neck, one hand already fondling me through my clothes. The slow, teasing movement of his hand accompanied by the heat of the fabric has me reeling. Goosebumps litter my skin, growing in intensity when he pushes the jacket from my shoulders. The gentle touch of his fingers makes me short of breath. I should laugh at the thought considering all that we've done together, but Lore has that effect on me. One small moment, one little movement makes me fall a little more.

Undressing does mean a momentary stop in the pleasurable touch of his hand on my arousal, though seeing Lore in all his naked glory is certainly worth the momentary pause. Our clothes lay forgotten, scattered across the room as Lore guides us to bed. I fall back onto the mattress, enjoying the view of Lore's body and imagining all that we're about to do.

As if he can read my thoughts, Lore smirks and roughly grips my thighs to part them. My body is overcome by shivers when he takes his place between my legs, grinding our hips together. The moment he's close, I grip

the back of his nape to hungrily mark his neck. Taking the skin between my teeth until his deep moan reverberates against my ear. It has been a while and I may be more eager than expected, but Lore certainly doesn't mind. He responds in kind, thrusting his hips against mine or clinging to my waist when something feels too good.

My skin breaks out with goosebumps. Muscles begin to twitch as my hands explore his back, feeling the muscles until my nails cling to his shoulders when Lore grabs my hips hard enough to bruise. He brings our hips together, grinding hard enough to make my thighs tremble with need. I release quiet whimpers, overcome by the added stimulation of Lore's fingers playing with my chest.

"You know," Lore bites my bottom lip, his eyes overcome by lust. "You're making it very difficult for me to be gentle."

I release a laugh followed by a drawn out moan when Lore's hand moves down to grip the base of my cock. My hips tremble from the slow pumping of his hand. I try to thrust, but he keeps my hips down, slowing the movement so the pleasure builds, coiling painfully hot.

"Shouldn't a lord have better control of himself?" I ask, regretting that decision when Lore releases me. Trembles move through me, leaving me panting. Lore rests his elbows on either side of my head, keeping the heat of his body off mine. It's maddening.

"Maybe this lord should show the control he has by leaving you to tend to yourself," he says, wearing nothing but a playful glare. One that moves down my body in a way that says he wouldn't dare leave. Still, I play the game.

"But then you'd have to tend to yourself too," I say, taking hold of his arousal. Lore curses, already thrusting into my eager hand. "Do you really want that?"

Lore kisses me hard, returning his body to mine. The heat of earlier returns with a vengeance, seeking to burn us from the inside out.

"Certainly not," he admits, a quiet whisper against my neck. "You drive me crazy, my sweet Seren."

My mind grows hazy when Lore continues the rough grinding of his hips against mine. My nails dig into his hips, likely leaving crescent shapes as my back arches off the bed. The pleasure grows until it's hard to breathe. Then he retreats, giving me the briefest moment of reprieve before his mouth wreaks havoc on my arousal. Lore's lips encase my tip, a searing heat that leaves my mind reeling. I tear into the sheets, heels planting themselves firmly against the mattress as his mouth works magic.

"Lore," I moan, trying to thrust into his mouth. His hands keep me at bay, sucking me off until his cheeks are hollow. The unexpected touch of his fingers massaging the area between my cock and my entrance makes my cries range in volume, worrying me of who might overhear. I throw a hand over my mouth, panting desperately from the ecstasy taking me.

Lore retreats prior to the orgasm threatening to finish me. He takes my hand, pressing it against the mattress to speak against my lips, "Don't hold back. I want to hear you."

"But the children--"

"They can't hear you. There's a spell on the room."

Kissing me, I don't even notice what he's reaching for until I'm flipped over. My erection rubs against the mattress. I anticipate the cool feeling of Lore's fingers only to be shocked by the warmth of his mouth. I moan against the pillows, quivering from the sensation of his tongue breaching my entrance. Lore's hands massage my cheeks, spreading them to wreak havoc on my senses. The bliss threatens to take me again, my erection rubbing against the mattress as Lore slickens my entrance. He slips in the first lubricated finger, lips now moving up my spine. Every kiss against my skin has me gasping for air or that might be from the second finger now spreading me.

"Is this gentle enough for you?" Lore asks, nuzzling my neck. He curls his fingers, hitting the bundle of nerves that makes me cry out. If he actually wanted me to answer he'd stop, but Lore doesn't relent. I tear the sheets,

whimpering from the quick penetration of his fingers. White's lining my vision, the pleasure taking me to points of ecstasy I didn't know possible.

"Stop, stop, if you don't," I groan when Lore retreats. My body falls limp onto the bed that I hadn't realized I rose from. Lore eases me onto my hands and knees. He presses his erection against my backside. I release a low groan, trembling when his warm chest rests against my back.

"Ready?" he asks, pressing his temple against mine. I give a slow nod, moaning at the pressure of Lore's cock breaching me. Feeling his girth stretch me to the point of madness almost makes my arms give out. Lore holds tight to my hips, never moving as he allows me to adjust. It really has been a while. I take a few long breaths then start rolling my hips.

Lore kisses my shoulder, growling as his body shakes with need. His long hair tickles my skin. His hands roaming over my body makes me shiver. Then I push my hips back hard, gasping from the pleasure that Lore's eager to continue. He slams into me, forcing a surprised curse. I don't think either of us can be gentle. His hands guide my hips to a ruthless rhythm that has the bed creaking against the floor. My hand scrambles to find the headboard, in need of a support to keep me upright or perhaps to hold onto reality. The ecstasy has me reeling, incapable of anything other than moaning against Lore's pleasure. That pleasure ripples through me, threatens to make this end before it even begins. Lore knocks every breath from my lungs, driving into me with such ferocity that I cry out his name. Faster and faster, harder when I beg for it.

I don't know what I'm saying. The words become gibberish in my pleasured mind, incapable of thinking of nothing other than Lore and our sex. My shrill cries and his low growls encircle me, adding to the ecstasy. I don't want him to stop, but white's lining my vision. Then Lore's hand grips my base and my orgasm hits me hard, sending me to the bed where I groan against the sheets. Lore continues slamming his hips into mine, every movement growing more and more erratic until I feel him finish. I'm wracked with shivers, breathing heavily.

Lore rests on top of me, one hand grasping my chin to bring our lips together. We kiss hungrily even after such an intense orgasm. He slips his

other arm around me, holding me to his warm body. His hair tickles my cheeks, making my toes curl. Lore marks my neck and shoulders, whispering something.

"What'd you say?" I ask, still trying to catch my breath. He nuzzles his nose in my neck, tickling me.

"Nothing. Do you feel alright?" he asks.

"Yeah, incredible actually." I hum and lay in the mess we've made for a moment longer because I'm too tired to move.

Lore chuckles. "Good because I was hoping to do this again sometime."

"What is this, a business transaction?" I laugh.

"Yes, I'll set up a prior notice of time, date, and location."

I snort at Lore's low laughter. He slips both arms around me, announcing that it's his turn to carry me to the bathroom. I'm not complaining. I'm still tired.

Lore carries me to the bathroom where he runs a warm shower that we both step into. I lean into his arms, enjoying the warmth and the soft touch of his lips against my shoulders. My fingers interlock with his at my waist and I can't stop myself from thinking again that I want this to last forever. That should be a scary thought considering how permanent it is, considering what it's implying that I want, but when I look back at Lore there's nothing but admiration in his eyes. A gentle touch of his lips on mine and I'm melting into his embrace, hoping he feels the same.

"Do you like it here, Seren?" he asks.

"That's an odd question to ask, all things considered," I reply, glancing curiously at him. Lore has an unreadable look about him, distant and concerning eyes that make me add; "Of course I like it here."

"And you wish to stay for a long while?"

I squirm in his grasp, staring at the water running down the drain. "Do you not want me to be here?"

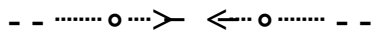
"That's also an odd question to ask, all things considered."

"Then why are you asking?"

"Because I need to know." He holds me tighter, like he thinks I may drift away if he doesn't. Resting his forehead against my shoulder, he repeats, "Do you wish to stay here for a long while?"

My heart skips a few beats, though I still answer honestly, "Yes."

He kisses my shoulder and says nothing more about it.



Welp, we went from sexy and sweet times to odd questions. What do you think about Seren's thoughts concerning staying with Lore for a long time? Why did Lore ask about it?

89. To See the Truth

Warning: Slight gore

Late in the evening, I wake up from a cold draft. Where Lore once slept in my arms is now empty. Suspecting he got up to grab a drink or use the bathroom, I turn to my side to give my arm a rest. That's when I find Lore sitting on the edge of the bed donning a puzzling expression; a distant gaze, eyes deep cerulean as dark as the depths of the ocean.

Offering his hand, he says, "Come with me."

"It's the middle of the night," I argue, rubbing my eyes. "Has something happened?"

I've noticed that he has changed from his sleep pants to a plain dark top and pants. His hair's pulled into a tight ponytail and a pair of black gloves cover his hands. An ebony handle for a dagger rests at his waist, one I've never seen before. For unknown reasons, the attire unsettles me. The air has a chill that wasn't there moments ago. That chill makes my gut lurch, though I'm unclear of what I want to do or should do.

"Are you going somewhere?" I ask, glancing at the window to check if I'm mistaking the time. I haven't; the sun has yet to rise. It's the dead of night.

" *We* are going somewhere," he answers, grasping my hand. With a single tug, he has me stumbling out of bed. "Wear something you can ruin."

"What?"

"Come to my room when you're ready." He exits without another word. Every step is so eerily quiet that I find myself rushing to dress. Something is amiss; the way he spoke, the way he moved, the way he looked at me didn't sit quite right. A heavy sensation settles in my gut, like a boulder has taken to testing the strength of my stomach.

Once dressed, I walk to Lore's room. The door is unlocked. I push it open. Lore stands by the window, closing the curtains to cast the room in darkness. The only light comes from a small candle on the bedside table. Our shadows stretch across the room into the dark corners, becoming one.

"Shut and lock the door," Lore orders. I do so, hesitantly.

"What's going on?" I inquire, gazing at Lore's silhouette that fades into the shadows.

"You said you wished to learn my secrets. I've shared a few with you already." Lore faces me wearing that same distant stare. He has cut a piece of himself off that refuses to reveal what's truly on his mind. "This last secret is one I guarantee you will regret learning. Make the decision now; remain oblivious and live happily here while setting aside everything having to do with the church or learn the truth that will change everything, possibly even us."

"Us?" I echo, approaching him. "Why would this change anything about us? What's happening? You can't expect me to answer when you're being so vague."

"I normally wouldn't be, but it's doubtful Draven can make you forget this truth once I've revealed it," Lore replies. "Draven's trait, you aren't aware of it, correct?"

I nod.

"Draven can change past memories and even leave behind goals for the future. No one will be the wiser."

"How did the church never discover his trait?" I ask, baffled to learn Draven's capable of such things.

"Draven was born in Vexsis. Revealing their trait is only necessary when they cross over to earth, but sometimes a paper goes missing here or there. So long as the church had no excuse to interrogate a noble such as myself, they had no right to, and I managed to keep his trait off the records."

That is a nifty card to have in his back pocket.

"As gifted as Draven is, you are a trained paladin capable of taking down two advanced Warlords on your own. You even broke free of Roemithia's torment. There's a high probability that Draven's trait will not work on you," Lore elaborates. He steps away from the window. The golden light of the candle reflects off the darkness of his eyes. Golden flakes drifting within endless blue. "Once you see this, we may not be able to make you unsee it. Awful memories will be dredged up and even more added, so you have to make a choice."

Approaching him, I rest my hands on his neck, feeling the rapid beat of his heart beneath my fingertips. His eyes flutter closed when our foreheads brush. Every word I speak is muttered against his parted lips, "You should already know my decision, Lore."

"I must insist that you think over it more."

"I will not. I wish to be here with you and the kids. Whatever this is, we'll handle it together." I press a kiss to his lips. "And if bad memories are dredged up, then it will be up to you to hold me through the night."

Lore releases a relieved chuckle. He leans in for another kiss, speaking against my lips, "I will gladly do that."

Reaching into his pocket, Lore retrieves a flat triangular object. White as snow and smooth as a worn river stone. He presses his thumb against the center. The object expands, revealing red lightning streaks within. This energy reminds me of the airship to Vexsis and the Warlords. Lore drops the object. Initially, the object hovers above the ground spinning in complete silence, then rests motionless atop the floor. A red rectangle appears above the object, like a door made of the same substance we passed to enter Vexsis.

Gazing at Lore, I catch yet another familiar glimpse; a kind of madness in his eyes similar to when he spoke of killing the Seymour's. I don't know what to make of it, an excitement upon revealing this to me or something more sinister.

"What... what is that?" I ask.

"A portal," he replies. "A very illegal one, but owning a nellore factory and having quite a few friends who are not fond of Vexsis or Earth makes obtaining and concealing illegal objects rather easy."

Secrets upon secrets, as expected. Where do they end, if ever? Lore has been an enigma since the day we met, but never would I have surmised all that he has kept from me. That I could never discover. He has always been one step ahead, as if he has played this game a thousand times and knows every possible move. Even mine, and he's been playing with me long before I realized it.

"Who are these friends?" I inquire, rubbing my fingers against my palm.

"They go by many names, but the one most use for them is the Red Moon."

"Lore..."

The crimson of the portal casts shadows in his eyes. "I warned you," he whispers.

He did, but after all we've gone through I'm not about to give up now. "Did you have anything to do with what happened on the airship, with those priests?" I ask, trembling at the memory.

"No. Many people enjoy claiming to be within the Red Moon. That was not a plan set up by them."

If Lore's being honest, I must take him at his word, however this entire situation puts me on edge. As if Lore has led me to a cliff where he promises a safe drop below. I must close my eyes and jump, feeling no fear and unaware if his words are true.

With a deep breath, I allow Lore to guide me through the portal. The feeling doesn't mimic going to Vexsis. There's something warm and my feet feel as if they aren't walking on solid ground. The world morphs to a brilliant red, deep as a ruby, blinding as if I'm peering into the center of a great flame.

Then it's gone. I find myself in what I can only presume to be the cellar of a church. I recognize the arched stonework and steepled ceiling. Among the provisions there's a statue of the Three Mothers to confirm my theory.

My blood runs cold upon spotting a priest gagged and bound at the center of the room. His head hangs low, shielding his face. Blood trickles out of a gash in his forehead, staining his once pristine white robes. Slash marks litter his arms and legs, tearing the robes to pieces. They lay scattered around him, soaking up the blood dripping from his injuries. My breath catches in my throat, although I'm unclear if it's from surprise or fear.

"What is this?" I whisper. Lore brushes past me to approach the nameless priest.

"This is a church cellar in Filderway," he replies, making my knees go weak.

We aren't in Nosa. We aren't even in Silra. Filderway is a full state away along the western shoreline. That portal brought us all the way here? How far is it's reach? This, accompanied by Lore's magic, is this not proof?

I swallow the lump in my throat. What I feel cannot be put into words for there's too much at once. Enough to keep me quiet and still, watching Lore stand by the bound priest. There's a chill to his gaze, more freezing than any winter I've ever felt. The once humid air of the cellar dissipates, replaced by an overwhelming cold.

Lore suddenly grasps the priest' shoulder so roughly that he releases a sharp cry heard even through the gag. "And this is someone who owes you much more than an apology."

Gripping the priest's chin painfully tight, Lore forces him to look up. I recognize those eyes; Priest Aja.

I can't breathe. A primal fear, that of a terrified child consumes me like a wicked storm. The turbulent wind ripping through my consciousness has me stumbling. Grasping the edge of a nearby table, I narrowly prevent myself from falling to the floor. My visions blurs, becoming incapable of

separating the past from the present. The cellar morphs into one of tiles and hospital beds. I try to blink away the memories, to ignore the sensation of Aja's hands and his smile hovering about me, but the memories won't leave me be. They drag me under an unforgiving current, threatening to drown me.

"Lore, how... he... why is he here?" My voice comes out as a pathetic whimper.

"Priest Aja has been on my watch list for quite a while," Lore replies, approaching me. I don't know what to do when he takes me into his arms, holding so tightly I fear he'll shatter me into pieces. "He's a rotten bastard who has done the same to others as he did to you."

I don't know where to look, shifting my attention between Lore and Aja. Then Lore rests two fingers beneath my chin, keeping my attention on his luminous eyes.

"How did you...?" I mumble.

"I told you, he was on my list for a while. After what happened in Vexsis, I did a little digging to see who worked at Trinia around the time you were training. I wasn't certain it was him, but," Lore hesitates, his eyes drifting over me in slow motions. I still can't read his expression. There's a distance I can't cross.

"He has a thing for teenage boys, so he fits the bill," he finally finishes in a harsh growl.

I want to hurl. I want to scream. I want to run, but Lore nudges me. I stumble forward, biting back a frightened whimper. When Lore's arm slips around my shoulder, I almost fight him off, terrified of being held down. But then his back rests flush against my chest, returning warmth to my chilled limbs. He doesn't heave as I do, making his slow breaths comforting. Though the panic remains like a snake waiting to strike, I'm able to breathe easier. My hands reach for his arms, still unclear if I wish to grip for my life or set myself free when he starts walking towards Aja.

"When you came to my estate, you were searching for a serial killer," Lore says, hugging me as a lover would when whispering sweet nothings. "Well you found me, my sweet Seren, and tonight we're going to kill this priest together."

"I... Lore, t-this--"

"Shh," he whispers, reaching for something at his side. I don't know what it is, too overwhelmed to look away from Aja's pleading eyes. Then I feel the familiar hilt of a blade in the palm of my hand. Looking down, the dagger Lore carried now rests firmly in my grasp. He keeps a grip on me, ensuring I won't drop the dagger, but he doesn't have to. I'm holding it so tightly that my knuckles ache.

"Trust me, this will make you feel so much better," he says, inching us closer. Aja panics, rattling the chair with his erratic movements. The gag softens his cries, but they continue as soft hums in the air.

"This bastard didn't hurt just you. There were boys before and boys after," Lore adds, every hushed word making my skin bristle with heat.

Aja hurt other kids. He kept hurting them. He took advantage of them, of me, of my trust and my faith.

"He deserves punishment," Lore urges, pressing his cheek against mine. "I admit that it's frightening at first, but afterwards--after they're gone, there's bliss. Unbelievable bliss. Trust me."

We stand in front of Aja now. Lore raises our hands so the blade rests on Aja's cheek. Pressing forward, the tip of the blade pierces his skin. Blood trickles down his chin to his neck. His pleas grow louder, almost understandable.

I don't know if I can do this even after what Aja has done to me, and to others. Though it would be a lie to say that I don't want him to die, that I don't want him to feel immeasurable pain, I'm not certain if I can deal out that pain myself.

...but why not? Have I not killed and hurt others before? Innocent people; vampires and dhampir that the church condemned and I followed blindly. Now a member of that church sits before me, one who caused harm to so many, who helped take away far more than my childhood, yet I'm hesitating. Why? Do I still fear the church? Do I fear myself? I don't know what it is. I don't know what I want.

"Seren," Lore calls like a siren beckoning me to sea.

He says nothing when I reach out to remove Aja's gag. I'm not sure why.

"S-Seren," Aja whimpers. His voice is more hoarse than I remember, years of cigar smoke I presume. He reveals crooked, yellow teeth that make me think of the blight test; the straps around me, the cold metal room, and the smothering scent of sterilization.

"You don't want to do this," he pleads with tears in his eyes. "I know I've-- I've done wrong by you and many others, but I've changed. I've begged the mothers for forgiveness and sought the light. That is why I relocated, to get away from that life. I swear I haven't done anything. I haven't, please!"

His pleas do not incite forgiveness or care. They bring about rage. A searing anger that screams; he dared commit such heinous acts and all he did was pray? I spent my life bottling up my past, recently dealing with it in waves of terror, and who knows what others have gone through, but all he has done *is pray* . Begged, even now, pleading for his pathetic life when...

"How many boys pleaded with you to stop?" My question makes him choke. "Did you ever hear any of them beg the mothers to make you stop?" He cries pathetically. "Do you regret any of it or do you only regret getting caught?"

"Seren, please, I--"

The dagger digs into his thigh. Aja screams. The shrill sound rings in my mind. The dagger pierces his stomach. His shoulder. His arm. Aja's screams grow. Lore releases me. There's blood. So much red consuming my vision. There's nothing in my mind, only the repeated action of bringing the dagger

up and down. Hearing Aja scream, incapable of moving, exactly as I was, stuck in place, crying out for help that never came. The world blazes red, strong as a raging inferno that overtakes me until I'm left heaving.

"Seren." I rear back, almost stabbing Lore in the chest for merely speaking my name. He catches my wrist, holding firm. "It's okay now. He's gone."

"Who's gone?" I ask, breathing heavily. I don't even know why I'm so winded. My arm hurts, as does my hand, like I cut--

Blood drips from my hand as if I've bathed in it. The dagger's bloodied from tip to handle. My hand barely holds the handle, the tip of my fingers have rested against the blade, slicing through my own skin. Looking down, my clothes are stained, equally caked in blood. There's something warm on my face. I bring my hand up to touch it, feeling the familiar sensation of blood smeared across my skin and stuck in my hair.

Lore nods to my right. When I look over, there's an unrecognizable corpse stabbed too many times to count. His face resembles that of a man mauled by a wild animal, torn to shreds so the skin slips off the bone. His guts slither out of his open stomach like snakes, slipping to the floor where a pool of blood has formed.

My stomach knots. I vomit and drop the dagger. Lore grasps my waist, preventing me from stumbling to the floor in a frantic mess. He holds me tightly, preventing me from crumbling as I whimper out, "I... I did...I killed him."

"I told you, it's frightening at first, but take a breath." He does and I mimic him. "And another." We repeat until I'm breathing steadily. "He's gone. He'll never hurt you again. He'll never hurt anyone again."

"But the church--"

"Will think he was killed by the serial killer they're continuing to search for," Lore interjects. He brushes the hair from my face, smearing blood across his gloves. "Only you and I know of this. Now," he gently guides me

towards the portal I hadn't realized he reopened. "Clean yourself up. By the time you're done, I'll have returned and we may discuss further."

"F-Further?" I sputter, fitting my hands together in hopes to stop them trembling.

"Oh, my sweet Seren." He rests a gentle hand on my cheek, offering a twisted smile. "The church, the mortal monarchy as well as the vampire monarchy, there is so much more to them that you've yet to learn. But after tonight, once you see the truth, we will burn them all to the ground."

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***sips tea* Well, this was a very big reveal chapter. Lore is the serial killer Seren has been searching for. Seren has killed Aja with Lore's help. Lore has even more secrets concerning the church and monarchies. How are you feeling after this reveal? What more is there to learn? Will Seren regret what happened tonight? Will he still be able to accept Lore after knowing the truth? I did mention this story would get dark so... yeah. Here we are.**

90. What They've Been Hiding

I stare at myself in Lore's bathroom mirror; a panicked man covered in blood. Peeling off my shirt resembles ripping off a bandaid. My body aches, muscles screaming with the pain of one who ran a marathon. The clothes lay forgotten on the floor. I slip into the shower. The warm water tickles my skin, carrying the blood to circle around my toes.

Did this really happen? Lore, the man I... I've come to deeply care for is the serial killer I was sent to find. He has been here, right under my nose, all this time. He's the father of the children I've come to care for. The man who has brought me to his home, who made me see the church for what it truly is, who has given me a chance to become more than what the church made me to be. The images I saw--what Olere revealed--Lore did that.

I run my fingers through my hair, down my neck to wrap tightly around my chest. Though the water's warm enough to steam, I shiver. I gnaw at my thumbnails until they rip. More blood drips from my nails, following the rest down the drain.

What Lore has done, it's towards bad people, like tonight. Aja, that sick disgusting bastard hurt me and now I--oddly enough, it does feel better. Thinking his name didn't bring about the memory of him on top of me, the pain, or his lecherous grin. He is gone. Dead. Not out in the world living a life he doesn't deserve to live. A strangled laugh leaves my lips, then another. Each makes my chest ache. Tears build in my eyes. I don't know why. I can't stop crying. I press my left hand against the cut along the fingers of my right hand. The pain reminds me that this is real, that earlier happened. Aja is dead. I killed him and I don't feel any remorse and I don't care that I don't.

There is fear though, that much is certain when I jolt at the sound of the bathroom door opening. My senses are all over the place, otherwise I would have known Lore was entering. I hear his clothes hit the floor. He brushes back the curtain donning a quiet expression. While not as bloodied as me,

it's clear Lore handled the body in some manner. Streaks of red rest along his arms where the blood must have gotten under his clothes and I think a bit in his hair that now rests along his shoulders.

"You've been here a while. I'm surprised the water is still warm," he says, hesitating by the edge of the tub. When I make no move to prevent him from entering, he steps into the tub.

"I didn't realize," I mumble. Lore takes my hand. Even after what happened, what he said, and what I've learned, my heart continues racing from his mere touch. Not in fear, only in desire, even admiration, and I don't know what that means. Have I gone mad?

"You've yet to heal this?" He hums, observing the injury along my fingers.

"I don't want to. I don't know how to explain it, but it's a reminder. The pain lets me know tonight actually happened."

Lore raises my hand to kiss my knuckles. "So be it, but we must at least tend to the wound."

"Okay." I grab a nearby rag to dab the blood from Lore's arms.

"I didn't think you would be so calm about this," he says, allowing me to comb my fingers through his hair.

"I wouldn't call this being calm. My heart is ready to burst. I can't think straight, but knowing that he's gone, I...am I a monster to be relieved? To be happy?"

"Asking a monster if you are a monster is a bit counterproductive." He snakes an arm around my waist, pulling me into his warm embrace. "Monsters are rarely born. They are forged. We have been forged, Seren. You by a church meant to protect you and I by a world unaccepting of my kind."

I rest my forehead against his chest. My ears ring from a headache that threatens to burst my skull. But as Lore holds me, when I feel his lips brush

against my temple, there's moments of peace. The noise in my head dissipates.

"I didn't believe in fate or destiny until I met you," Lore suddenly speaks.

"What do you mean?"

"Call me crazy, but I believe we were meant to find each other," he says, running his hands soothingly along my back. "A paladin of unbelievable strength leaving the church who forged him into a mighty weapon and a dhampir capable of magic none will ever suspect. Is it not strange that these two lost souls somehow found each other?"

"It does seem an odd coincidence," I answer. This evening has left me reeling. I don't know if I've truly caught up, if I realize what has been done and what will happen. The answers to my questions are obvious, yet I continue to speak them as if I need to hear every piece a thousand times over to believe them. "You've truly killed more than the Seymours?"

"I have," he replies.

"You're truly the serial killer the church is searching for?"

"I am."

"You kill--"

"Those who deserve it," Lore interrupts. "I kill those who rape, torture, and murder others like us; the abandoned, the unloved, the unwanted, the mistreated, and the damned. Whatever you wish to call us, I deal out the justice the world has never given us."

His lips set into a thin line, then curl like the wicked snarl of a wild animal. "They take advantage of us, using power and faith to rule over those incapable of protecting themselves. We're expected to lay down and take it, to let them walk all over us. The church is not the only one guilty of this. The church searched for me because they realized someone had discovered so many of the dirty secrets they've been hiding."

My wide eyes have Lore leaning in to whisper, "Do you think they were unaware of what Priest Aja had done to you, to the other boys?"

My stomach churns. I don't want to believe it even after all that has happened.

"Not everyone knew, of course. Olere, for example, is unlikely to have known." I release a relieved sigh that lasts no longer than a second for Lore continues speaking, "But power calls to those who will abuse it. The church created a space for the wicked to grow powerful, to abuse those gullible enough to follow them. Then there's the mortal monarchy, complacent and vain. You don't hear much because they don't want you to, working behind closed doors to get what they desire, no matter how immoral. And lastly, there is the vampire monarchy; equally as treacherous and greedy. All of these organizations feed into one another, drowning the rest of us and never expecting any to stand against them, at least none worthy."

Then Lore looks at me, somehow desperate and overwhelmed. He smiles, crooked and painful, his arms now trembling around my waist. "This has always been my way of fighting back, of taking control, making them terrified of the monster in the dark, the one they cannot understand or catch, but we can change that. You and I, we can be so much more. You understand, don't you, Seren?"

I don't know if I do. I don't know what he's implying. There's too much going on for me to think. Maybe Lore knows this because he presses his lips against my temple, easing the tension that has come to settle into my very bones.

"Let's finish here. It's best if I tell you more while we're seated," he says.

That's equally overwhelming to hear. There's more when I can't believe there could possibly be more, but he's right. My legs are weak. I'm exhausted, so Lore and I finish up in the shower. Afterwards, he takes flames to our clothes, burning them to ashes in the sink. The ashes filter down the drain, removing all evidence of what transpired tonight. Even my bloody footprints once left in Lore's room are now gone. Did Draven or Lore clean them? No doubt Draven knows about all this too. He's the one

Lore's always calling upon and his trait, that is mighty useful, but I don't have the chance to ask. Lore takes my hand once we've both dressed, guiding me to bed.

"What more could you possibly have to tell?" I ask, fearing the answer.

Lore appears as fearful to give it. He hesitates, holding my hand tight enough to cut off the circulation. Then he sighs and reveals a truth I couldn't have imagined, "There is a reason Valyork has yet to attack Earth again that has very little to do with the lack of technology. There is a reason the mortal monarchy and the Holy Church will not attack each other and that is because all three leech off one another. The Holy Church sends their nonbelievers far away under the guise that they wish to lead different lives. The monarchy quietly gathers up a few so as to not lead to suspicion and sends them to Vexsis to join the blood farms. It is a system, one where the church is able to rid itself of any who may harm them, where the monarchy is paid a very hefty sum for their participation and discretion, and the vampires get to gorge themselves on mortal blood, a mage's blood at that. While all three wish to break free from one another, their parasitic ways have worked for centuries, so that man you saw in Vexsis, you were right. You most certainly knew him."

Lore's words hang heavy on the air. One could argue that my life changed the moment I met him, in ways I could never imagine. All that I thought I knew has been stripped bare, laid before me as unrecognizable. My faith, my trust, lies in shambles, scattered in a darkness I was led to believe was light. The life I have led, what I have done, feels meaningless. Those I've killed were taken under the orders of an organization so corrupt that I wish to see it bathed in blood and darkness, to watch the pristine white walls crumble as flames sear everything to ash.

"I know this is a lot to take in," Lore adds.

"A lot is an understatement." I release a strangled breath and another. "I... I don't get it all. If this benefits the vampires, why are Valyork's children attempting to start trouble?"

"They're cocky bastards who believe they can overtake Earth and seek out blood when they wish without having to pay for it. And of course they hate the Holy Church for killing many of their innocent brethren, as well as starting that ridiculous rumor that we came from some dark master. Valyork may be paranoid, but he fought relentlessly in the Vampire Wars. He knows the cost of war. He would rather pay for blood than risk the lives of his people on a chance."

My ears start to ring again. A headache has formed so powerful that I almost vomited a second time this evening. Lore rests a hand on my back when I lurch over, allowing my head to hang between my legs. I was right to assume the church was lying. I was very wrong about what they were lying about.

"How have they never been caught? How do you even know this? Do you have proof?" I ask.

"They have been caught, but when three powerful entities work together, you can imagine how easy it is to be rid of trouble," Lore replies, once again hesitating to further elaborate. "The Holy Church does have quite a few well trained individuals to handle those they rather not hear from again."

Well trained individuals meaning those like me and the champions. The rebellions we were sent after or vampires we sought out, there's a chance they knew the truth. A chance they hoped to reveal that truth to the world and we were the perfect kill squad.

"The knights of the king take care of mortal... pests, I presume?"

Lore nods. "Just as Valyork ensures no one knows he is the one buying humans for the blood farms. It's believed there's a powerful black market, even within Vexsis. I don't even know who all is involved in his lies."

"How did you learn of this?"

"I've always had my suspicions since my first visit to Vexsis. I found it strange how many mortals they had, considering the way they treat them. I

searched for the black market, which is when I found that there's very little trading of mortals between Vexsis and Earth. That meant something else was afoot, so I continued keeping an eye on missing persons. I noticed many were former members of the church and kept watch. They are sneaky about it. Took me almost a decade to finally catch the knights stealing some poor sap in the night."

"I don't know what to do with this," I admit, pressing my palms against my aching temple. Lore rests his hand beneath my chin, bringing me upright to look at him. His eyes hold an almost excited glint, like he has discovered something grand.

"I am not the only one who knows of this. The Red Moon is aware too."

"Is that meant to make me feel better?"

"Trust me, I wouldn't be working with them if I thought they would cause too much trouble. I've always avoided them because many of their past leaders lacked any real vision. They merely wanted to start trouble, but now," Lore grips the back of my neck, pulling me in to rest his forehead against mine. "Now all the pieces are falling into place and we have a chance at tearing it all down."

"How?"

"Like I said, a weapon forged by the church, a dhampir with magic, an entire revolutionary group, and even a member on the inside--"

"We are not bringing Olere into this," I interject, trying to retreat.

Lore keeps a firm hold on me. "He's already involved. The church will discover what he has been looking into. Is it not better to involve him in hopes that we can stop the church before they get to him?"

I press my hands against Lore's chest. He releases me, donning a frown.

"I think I need to rest before we discuss this more. I'm...I feel like my head is going to burst," I say, shifting into bed so I can bury myself within the

covers. They aren't shields capable of protecting me from spells, but they are warm and that eases me. Not enough to rest, but enough to breathe normally.

"You're staying here?" Lore asks.

"Where else would I go?"

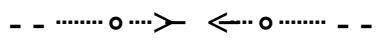
"Your room."

"Do you want me to go to my room?

The bed shifts. Lore's body presses against mine. He holds me as tight as he was before, telling me his answer before he says it, "No. I want you to stay here with me."

"I want you with me too." I shiver at the touch of his lips against the back of my neck. Then his forehead rests against my back, his legs entangling with mine. If the situation were different, I'd laugh over his adorable nature. His need to practically make us one, but right now I need that too. I don't know what will become of me without him.

He was right to warn me. These are truths I cannot unsee. They're truths that will keep me up for many nights to come, maybe the rest of my life. In a twisted way, they make me feel closer to Lore. The secrets he was hiding, I know them now like I always wanted. Though far more than expected, I wouldn't change anything. I wouldn't want to be anywhere other than right here in Lore's arms, knowing he'll be with me when I wake.



So sorry everyone! I got caught up with some tedious stuff today, thought I was done and could relax, then remembered I had to update. Reminder, my patreon is 15 episodes ahead. My patreon exclusive will post there February 1st, so if you want to give it a try, go to patreon.com/Twoony or follow the external link. Anyway, there we have it, those in power are corrupt bastards using one another to benefit themselves and harm everyone else. Did you expect the

conspiracy to be this widespread? What could possibly happen next, hmm?

91. Draven's Truths

I wake long before Lore does. If he notices my departure, he makes no mention of it. I drift through the halls, unsure of where I'm going. Opening the doors to the yard, my toes curl in the cool grass covered in dew. The early morning sun filters through the trees, warming my chilled cheeks.

I heave an unsteady breath, wondering if what we had done last night has been found. Who found Aja's body? Will another paladin investigate his death? Will they ever find us? Lore has succeeded this long without getting caught. The church merely wanted to frame him because he's open about his distaste towards them, so even while suspected it wasn't for leaving behind clues. I wasn't capable of finding proof, that's for damn sure. He had to hand every piece over for me to barely comprehend. Still, these nerves won't leave me be.

I sit on the edge of the fountain, running my fingers over the cool water. My reflection stares back at me; a confused man sitting on the cusp of something horrifying or something grand.

Sighing, I look away towards the estate where I notice a familiar head of red moving through the halls; Draven. He hasn't noticed me or he might have ran for the hills once realizing I'm hurrying to him at such an early hour. Draven's the only other person who knows of this. I can speak to him with a more level head. Around Lore, I think of us and maybe that clouds my judgment. Maybe I'm so caught up in him that I'm incapable of seeing the truth, so I rush to find the butler. He's heading towards the kitchens when I catch up to him. My hand grasps his wrist. Pivoting on his heel, Draven doesn't look surprised to see me.

"Can we talk in private?" I whisper, a little puzzled when he nods. I expected that he would at least feign a fight, but Draven walks towards the school house claiming there won't be anyone there this early in the morning. I follow after him in silence, sitting in one of the classrooms while he closes the door behind us.

"Do you know what happened last night?" I ask, wringing my hands together.

"I do," he answers, leaning against a nearby desk.

"Are you alright with discussing this with me?"

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't." He gives me an almost apologetic stare that makes me squirm in place.

"How long have you been working with Lore on--on all this?"

"Since I was eighteen, although I've known of what he was doing since I was thirteen." Draven sighs upon seeing my wide eyes. "I witnessed His Grace killing my step mother."

My mouth runs dry. Trying to respond results in sputtered words that even I can't comprehend.

"My mother died before I was old enough to remember her," he declares. "My father was well off, so there were quite a few interested parties. Unfortunately, he married a woman with the illest of intentions. After he died under mysterious circumstances, I suspected her, but I was only a kid and I was in her way of a hefty inheritance. The night she tried to take my life, His Grace revealed himself to save me. He had only planned to take her life as she had killed her previous husband and her own child went missing years earlier."

Draven takes a seat at the desk across from me. He rests his elbows on his legs, twiddling his fingers as if he's that kid again, nervous and unsure of what to do. "I was grateful that he sought revenge in my stead, even more so when he offered to give me a home. I knew that anyone who adopted me would do so to get my father's money and, frankly, I felt connected with him after that night. I agreed with what he was doing; seeking justice against those who get away with their crimes. While I continue to feel that way, you must be careful, Seren."

"Careful?" I echoe, once again left puzzled in the face of reality. Last night, and now this, it's as if my entire life has been ripped out from under me. I'm drifting through nothing, reaching out for anything to hold me steady. When I think I've grasped on to safety, it breaks and I fall faster expecting to hit a bottom that never comes.

"Have you ever wondered where the children come from?" Draven asks, making my nails dig into the desk.

"The papers the church had on Lore said he adopted them from local orphanages."

"Did any of them say how they got there?"

I shake my head.

"Let's just say that none of the children here came from happy homes. Many of them would still be there if not for His Grace's *preemptive* measures."

I can't breathe. The room feels too small. My vision blurs, muscles ache, and a cold sweat forms on my brow. My mind's screaming *run* , but my heart won't accept it; Lore killed the biological parents of his children...

I'm surprised when Draven takes my hand. There's nerves again, revealing how unaccustomed he is to comforting someone. Or maybe he's uncomfortable because it's me. Regardless, he holds tight to my hand. There's sorrow in his eyes, and maybe fear.

"I don't think Lore is a bad man," he says. "But he isn't a good man either. He has rules; warped ones that he never breaks. Abusers, murderers, rapists, especially those who harm children, Lore will take their lives and I've assisted in those endeavors because I generally believe in what he's doing. However, there is something else he hates and that is complacency."

When Draven doesn't continue, I squeeze his hand and ask, "What does that mean?"

"Let's say there is a family where the father hits the mother. The mother, abused for many years, doesn't leave and thus her child faces that same wrath. Sometimes the mother gets upset and raises her voice at the child. She apologizes afterwards, overcome by sorrow and pain, incapable of separating from the father for whatever reason. Do you think she deserves death?"

"No, she needs help..." I bite my lip until it hurts. "But Lore doesn't give that, does he?"

Draven shakes his head. "He views her as complacent in the abuse of a child because he cannot separate them. Many knew of his abuse even if they never raised a hand against him and he hated them for doing nothing. When he sees a child in a similar situation, he can't see it as anything different than his own and he won't listen to reason. I admit it isn't a common occurrence, but you must understand what Lore is capable of, and what he almost did to you."

My blood runs cold, seemingly resting steadily in my veins so they grow heavy as lead. I don't want to hear his words. I twist away as if that will silence the truth.

"You weren't meant to survive after leaving the estate," Draven whispers, relentless in his admissions. "Once you left without proof, we would let the church stew for a while. Let them search and never find anything, maybe even for years, then we would have made our move when you least expected us. A death to hang over the church's head that the monster they're searching for is right in front of them and they couldn't stop him because you, he saw, as complacent. You were merely lucky enough to garner his interest."

This shouldn't shock me as much as it does. Lore and I were enemies when we met. The church sent me to find a killer, to blackmail him if I had to. I was a threat to his family, capable of taking their lives merely because I could, so why wouldn't he wish death upon me? Why wouldn't he go through with ridding the world of me if he could? But hearing Draven admit it so surely, knowing that there was a time when Lore was planning my demise makes me sick because... because...

I lean forward, hanging my head between my legs. It's hard to breathe. Draven allows me this moment. He sits in silence as I work through my emotions. Sorrow, anger, fear, and something so deep that my chest rings with pain, a realization that I can't leave because Lore has caught me. He has me tied up so tightly that there's no escape because... because I love him. I love him so much that I want to ignore everything. I don't want to care. I want to accept every dark secret if it means I can stay with him. Is there something wrong with me? Am I sick? Have I been twisted beyond repair?

"Are you trying to say that Lore--that he doesn't care for me as I do him?" I ask, hating how the sound comes out as a sad whimper.

"No, quite the opposite," Draven answers, bringing me to look up at him. I'm desperate to hear that again, even if it isn't from Lore's lips. "He wants you more than anything, enough to ensure no one else would take you."

"Don't tell me you have even more to share."

"If you don't want me to share it then I won't."

Groaning, I run my fingers through my hair, holding so tightly to the strands that I risk ripping them from my scalp. "Tell me."

"Are you cer--"

"Tell me, Draven." Although I'm getting the sick sensation that I already know.

"Jakoby doesn't remember you because I made him forget, under His Grace's orders."

I should have suspected that as soon as Lore revealed Draven's trait, but I didn't want to consider it. Just like I don't want to believe it now and I don't know what to do after learning of all this. I can't believe it's now, after all that I've learned, that I've admitted to myself how much I love Lore. Would it have been harder to learn the truth if I admitted this sooner? Or would I have learned these truths bit by bit and managed to escape Lore's grasp?

"At the time, His Grace told me it was because he felt you were making progress, minimal but progress nonetheless. He thought he could make you see the church for what it is, but not if you got into a relationship with someone from the church. Now though, I think he gave the order because he was jealous, even if he didn't understand or accept that himself," Draven adds.

"Why are you revealing all this to me now? You never speak to me, but now you're sharing all this without a second thought," I growl without meaning to. I'm not angry with him. I'm angry with myself for not seeing this sooner.

Have I not switched out one manipulator for another? Am I not falling for Lore's charms like I did the church because I'm desperate for comfort? Or is it all entirely different? Am I allowed to stay with Lore, to love him even now?

"That is where you're wrong. I've put a great deal of thought into this," Draven argues. "I would never speak of this prior to His Grace's own admissions. If he wanted to keep you in the dark, so be it, although I have been hoping that he would include you."

"Why?"

"Because he's better with you."

I raise a quizzical brow. "How so?"

"He's focused on bringing down the parasitic ways of our so-called rulers. Before, we both realized we were not in a position to do more. We provided justice in the ways we could, minimal but better than nothing. With you, with the Red Moon, even the champion, we have a chance and he realizes this. He's focusing on important matters rather than seeking vengeance. Committing acts such as this changes a person and Lore has been doing this for a long time. He needed someone like you." Draven looks down as if he's ashamed. "I wanted you to understand the severity of the situation, but I'm selfishly hoping that you'll remain here, that you'll help even after learning all this."

"And how is that selfish?"

Draven shifts his attention through the room, hesitating to reply, "I'm indebted to His Grace. While I know I could leave as I've never been forced to stay or work here, I want to finish what we started, but that has been becoming more and more difficult for me."

That gets the first smile out of me since yesterday. "Because of Cyan?"

Draven doesn't answer, which is answer enough. Rising, he adjusts his jacket as if it has become rumpled. "Do take time to think about this."

"Trust me, thinking is all I'm going to be doing for a while."

Draven stares at me for a long moment. He awkwardly pats my shoulder making me snort, then he's gone, leaving me in the aftermath.

I don't let the tears fall until I know he's long gone.

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The Secrets of Lore Seymour is now complete on my patreon. If you'd like to finish up the story and read extra chapters, you can pay $2 then cancel after you've read everything...or stick around for my new stories ;D just go to patreon.com/Twoony

Anywho, Seren's really going through the ringer. Draven has revealed his past, that he witnessed Lore kill his stepmother and has been involved in the killings for a long time. Lore killed some of the biological parents of his adopted children. Lore planned to kill Seren after he left and Seren has realized something very important; he's in love with Lore. Will Seren be able to stay with Lore? Should he stay? How do you feel about Lore now that these truths have come to light?

92. On the Same Page

I've been continuously overwhelmed these last few months. Moving from one issue to the next; I am once again faced with a problem that I don't know how to address. I don't know what to think, how to feel, if what I'm feeling is okay, or if I've somehow become warped from an endless life of trials.

Lore is the serial killer the church searches for. I've assisted in one of those murders. Lore used Draven to make Jakoby forget about me. Lore killed some, if not all of the parents of the children he has adopted. Draven has assisted in much of these endeavors, including what they no doubt are planning with the Red Moon. I never surmised what the church had been doing, and I never surmised what Lore has been doing.

Draven said it himself; Lore has rules, but those rules are warped and I can't stand by them. Harming someone who needs help, someone like me who may be able to become better, is not acceptable. But saving children from terrible homes and bringing down the corrupt system abusing all of us by whatever means necessary; I stand behind that. Some things cannot be tamed by flames. They must be ripped out by the roots. Lore is willing to do that, and so am I.

I don't know if my decision is right. I'm unclear if my feelings are distorting my judgment, but the truth remains; I love Lore. I want to be with the children. I hope to help Lore raise them, to give them lives far better than we ever had. The Seymour Estate has become my home and those within it have become my family, a true family. Not one that beats me. Not one that would condemn me. Not one that would ever do me harm. A lot like the family that I lost and now I understand what it's like to be wanted, to have a place of comfort. I will stay. Under a few conditions.

I hurry to Lore's room, unsure if he has woken up yet. Opening the door, I find him seated on the side of the bed donning a quiet expression. He spots me, sitting rigid and knuckles bonewhite against the bed. Perhaps I worried

him by not being here. Maybe he thought I had run off after learning the truth, I'm not sure.

Shutting the door, I approach to take a seat beside him. He offers a cordial smile. "Good morning," he says. "Did you sleep alright?"

"At first, but I woke up earlier and couldn't go back to sleep. I had a lot to think about, even more after I spoke with Draven."

Lore tilts his head, silent questions brimming in his eyes when he merely asks, "About what?"

"A bit of everything."

He averts his gaze like a scolded child, one who knows they're about to get into even more trouble.

"I know what you had him do to Jakoby."

He clenches his eyes shut, gnawing at his bottom lip.

"You must know that I'm not okay with being manipulated."

"That isn't," he crosses his arms, growing increasingly uncomfortable. I can't believe that's possible. Lore's always in his element, but now he doesn't know what to do. Shifting on the bed, gazing at the wall, so out of place that it's visibly unsettling. "Had the two of you worked towards a real relationship, you may have remained infatuated with the church," he adds, looking at me as if he expects me to agree, to thank him for his brilliant plan.

"Was that the only reason?" I counter, noticing the stiffness to his jaw.

Rising, Lore paces the room, looking more like my panicked self than his usual charming demeanor. Then he stops and stares me down to ask, "So what if I was jealous? I hated that you went on that date, but you never liked me being with anyone either."

"I never brainwashed them into forgetting your entire existence, Lore. You manipulated me and Jakoby."

He glares at his feet, toes curling against the rug. A furious red simmers beneath his cheeks, though I can't say if the blush is from embarrassment or frustration. He probably never suspected to be caught and that worries me, that he may have kept such a big secret from me forever, that he may have more secrets or one day try to hide even more from me and I'm a fool to still be here. To actually want to stay.

Standing up, I approach him to speak firmly, "While it is true that a relationship with Jakoby may have prevented me from seeing the truth behind the church, the way you went about it was wrong. I'm not okay with how you handled the situation or how you kept it a secret from me and probably always would have, so I'm saying this here and now; if you want me to stay, if you truly care about me, you will never do something like that again and never keep secrets from me."

As if testing the waters, Lore slowly reaches for my hand. When I don't shake off his hold, he brings my knuckles to his lips, whispering against them, "I'm sorry, Seren. I won't and it won't happen again." He releases my hand, frowning. "Though I feel you have more to say."

"I do. Last night, I can't do that again."

Lore furrows his brow, visibly confused.

"I've killed enough in my short life time, Lore. As much as I agree that rotten bastards like Aja deserve justice, I can't...I don't think I can be the one to deal out that justice. I have enough nightmares to worry about. However, I will help in bringing down the church and the monarchies in whatever way I can, through battle when the time ultimately comes to it, but until then, I..."

Lore grasps my shoulders, massaging the tense muscles. "You do not need to explain yourself to me. I understand. Is there anything else?"

"We will discuss together who dies and who doesn't."

It's Lore's turn to tense. His hold almost hurts. He releases me, stepping away to eye me skeptically. "Draven spoke about more than Jakoby."

"He did." And based on Lore's reaction, Draven wasn't lying, although I never suspected he was. Shifting my weight from one foot to the other, I ask, "What happened to the parents of the children?"

"If the two of you spoke then you have the answers."

"I want to hear them from you."

"Isabella wasn't born to a wheelchair," Lore says, puzzling me, though the pieces fit together on their own quickly enough. He speaks of them anyway; "Her mother went a little too far after getting jealous of the *affection* her boyfriend had given Isabella. I learned of what occurred through the precinct. Isabella, of course, sided with her mother claiming her injury was an unfortunate accident even when everyone saw through the farce. Let's just say neither her mother or the wretched bastard will ever harm anyone again." Lore looks towards the door as if he can see the children through the walls. "Ashby and Angel's father enjoyed gambling and understood the price others would pay for his dhampir children. Unfortunately, he and his wife perished in a car accident. Too much to drink."

"And his wife, what did she do to deserve death?"

Lore wrinkles his brow as if my question offended him. "She let the bastard beat them, let him make a deal to sell them like livestock. She did nothing to protect them."

"Did he also hit her? Did he hurt her, like the church hurt me?"

"Your circumstances are entirely different," he growls.

"They are not! I killed innocent vampires and dhampir for the church, Lore. I did it because they made me believe I had to for the betterment of the world. I let them hurt children, like me. I, too, was complacent in the abuse and that's why you initially planned to kill me too, right?"

Lore rolls his shoulders, as if the mention of his previous plans makes him nauseous. Maybe that's a good sign or maybe Lore is such an excellent actor that, even now, I can't read him.

"I know the Seymour's hurt you," I say, taking hold of his arms when he tries to escape. He twists in my grasp, refusing to meet my gaze. "So many people knew what they were doing to you and they all turned a blind eye. They pretended like it wasn't happening and that was wrong. Everything that happened to you was wrong, but you of all people understand that situations are complicated. You hate generalization, but you're doing it yourself. An abused partner frightened of leaving shouldn't condemn them to death. They need help and we should give them that so that their children, so that Angel and Ashby may have lived a great life with their mother."

"They have a great life here!" He shrieks, shoving me. There's pure desperation in his eyes, the eyes of a man who wished someone would have said what he's saying to him as a child. "I give my children everything they could ever want and everything they'll ever need. More than they could ever imagine so they will never know hunger, pain, fear, only joy and comfort and love. I will keep them safe from anything or anyone who may do them harm. They will never go through what we did. My children, those who are grown, have families of their own now. They're happy and content, as they deserve to be, as they should have always had. The church, the monarchies, the vampires could drag my soul to whatever afterlife there is and I'll crawl my way out if they so much as try to harm a hair on any of my children's heads."

"I have no doubt about that, Lore." I chance grasping his hand, waiting for his fingers to relax. He shakes like he's on the verge of erupting, though the gentle rubbing of my fingers against his palm eases his heavy breathing.

"What's done is done," I say. "Angel and Ashby are happy here, but in the future, we will discuss these matters together. We give help when help can be given. We're meant to help those like us, right? The hated and the abused who have no one to fight for them."

Hesitating, he gives a slow nod, then sighs when I press a kiss to his cheek. He rests against me as if this conversation has taken a physical toll. Perhaps it has. Clearly Draven has never discussed this with Lore. He has always done everything mostly on his own, surrounding himself in more darkness. I doubt he has talked about his past enough either, dealt with the seemingly endless trauma. I hold tightly to him, making sure that he knows he isn't alone anymore.

"Let's not get angry at Draven for talking to me about this either," I say in what I hope to be a teasing tone.

Lore chuckles, a good sign. "If Draven spoke to you it's because he believes you needed to hear it. I will not get angry over that, though I do wish he had given me a warning."

"Understandable, so we are on the same page now, right?"

"Not quite yet," he says, puzzling me, then worrying me when he adds, "We should also discuss matters concerning the Red Moon."

Right, Lore's working with the Red Moon. I'm hesitant to join him even after he assured me that they're worth working with, otherwise they wouldn't have been given a chance. He's correct that we cannot do this alone. The church and the monarchies are too powerful together. As much as they hate each other, they love what they have accomplished and will assist one another to continue their parasitic ventures.

I don't know what to expect. I'm unclear on what our future holds, but I give a hesitant nod, possibly sealing our fate in a good or terrible way.

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This was something I considered heavily while writing, if I wanted to go this direction or not. When I started TSoLS, I wanted Lore to be a morally grey character. Someone you rooted for, but also understood that not everything he did was great. Yes, he loves his children, but he has taken things from them without them even realizing. Ashby and Angel may have had a great life with their mother, had she lived. They

have a great life now with Lore, but lost their mother who may have loved them just as dearly and that's something we'll never know. I didn't want Lore to just be a vigilante because I didn't believe it made sense with what he went through, so yeah, this is why I warned people that this story would be dark lol

How are you feeling after this discussion that they had? What do you think will happen should they work with the Red Moon?

93. Thinking Things Through

"What are the Red Moon's plans?" I ask, retaking my seat on the bed.

Lore joins me. "As of right now, they're continuing to debate on the best route to take. Their current leader is named Ristain and he has only been in charge for about two decades, taking control after his predecessor's demise."

That predecessor must be the woman beheaded by Holland, a champion of the church, after he quelled a rebellion in the south. We were taught stories of that uprising, one where the Red Moon managed to overtake two southern states, destroying cathedrals, calling for vampires and dhampir to join the fight. They expected more to help, but too many feared the church and the Red Moon. Though we were taught that the kingdom was faithful and knew right from wrong, that the people chose the Holy Mother's guidance and withstood the assault.

That rebellion was a big blow to the Red Moon, who returned underground and were often blamed for uprisings, though not always proven to be a part of them. Seems Ristain has kept them on the downlow, likely regrouping and preparing for this. Whatever this may be.

"The Red Moon has been relatively quiet, causing havoc here or there to remind people that they were around, but nothing as boisterous as their previous attempts against the Holy Church," Lore continues.

"And why is that?"

"Because Ristain isn't a fool. He saw how they were overtaken, how they continue to be overtaken, and has made changes. The command has shifted almost completely, previous members replaced and those too violent for the cause let go."

Puzzled, I ask, "Is that not a risk; letting people leave the group with information that could ruin them?"

"Trust that enough has been changed that even if any dared to speak to the Holy Church, they wouldn't learn anything," Lore answers. "It's one of the reasons I chose to assist them. I had been asked before on numerous occasions, sometimes even threatened."

That doesn't surprise me. The Red Moon is desperate to overthrow the church and they were once so violent that they were more like a gang than a revolutionary group. Although the church has always called them terrorists.

"Those who did threaten me are no longer part of the movement. Safe houses have moved. Lines of communication have changed. Ristain has almost remade the Red Moon from the ground up. From the times I have spoken to them, they are more interested in revealing the Holy Church's atrocities rather than committing random acts of violence. However, that obviously isn't the case for everyone," he continues, falling silent for a moment. His gaze drifts to the door, as does mine. Footsteps approach.

"Your Grace," Draven calls, knocking on the door. "Breakfast is ready."

"Alright. We will be down momentarily," Lore says. Draven's footsteps continue down the hall. The soft yawns and giggles of the children overtake the halls as they're all woken up. We hear their small feet hurry across the floor. The chairlift on the stairs hums to life.

"We best join them," Lore says, standing.

"Before we do, what really changed your mind about the Red Moon?" I ask, bringing Lore's quiet gaze to me. "There had to be something that stood out to you, that made you see them as a viable option. I can't say that I see them as one, even when I know we need help, so tell me."

Lore offers his hand, guiding me up from the bed. He slips his fingers between mine, a warm touch that I hope to grow very accustomed to. Though I doubt I will ever tire of it.

"As you may have already guessed, I keep my eye on crime. Draven and I attend to more serious matters while Cyan often goes on appointments of his own. The last few years, we've noticed a drop in missing persons. While

still concerning, it has become clear that someone else is paying attention and doing something about it," he explains.

"And that someone is the Red Moon? Were they not doing so before?"

Lore shakes his head. "Prior to Ristain, the leaders cared more about the destruction of the church that had condemned many of their members. They were primarily made up of vampires and dhampir. They didn't care about mortals, even if they were against the church. And yet they were cocky enough to think their rebellions would work as the mortals would come to their senses. I saw no point in dealing with those incapable of seeing such an obvious flaw."

"So the drop in missing persons has to do with Ristain. They're seeking out those who left the church and keeping them safe?"

"Yes, relocating them, giving them new identities so they may thrive in safety. While it has not solved the problem, it certainly helps and I find that means we have even more allies. We cannot stop the system unless we all band together. Does that ease your concerns?"

"Somewhat, yes," I admit around a nervous chuckle. "Everything continues to be overwhelming."

Lore nods, then tugs me towards the door. "Let us not think of this again today."

I don't know if I'm capable of that, at least until we reach breakfast where I learn that being around children does force my thoughts to cease. The children chatter over their food where I find myself mimicking what I saw Lore do around my initial arrival. Nalo almost drops his drink, a goblet filled with blood, on Reegan. I narrowly prevented the catastrophe only because I was wiping an honestly astounding wad of snot from Angel's nose after a huge sneeze. Lore smirks across the table, inspecting the wheels on Isabella's chair because they were squeaking. As chaotic as the morning is, having to eat with one hand clinging to Oliver who has decided my lap is a better seat than his chair then being surprised by Darika requesting that I teach her some self defense, I love every moment of it. The thought of this

being continued tomorrow, the day after, a month from now, and years from now has me smiling.

After breakfast, Lore heads to his office and the children follow Arline to the schoolhouse. I inspect the halls, searching for Draven to inform him that I spoke with Lore. That's when I spot the butler and Cyan standing awfully close to one another in the backyard. Draven gently takes Cyan's hand, linking their fingers for a brief moment.

My jaw drops.

Blushing, Cyan says something, then hurries to his workshop. Draven watches him go donning a soft smile that I've never seen on him. And that smile is gone when he turns to find me standing in the backdoor way to the house.

"I didn't want to interrupt," I say, trying to bite back a grin that I know I'm failing at based on Draven's deep scowl.

"So you spied on us instead," he snarls, brushing past me, making sure to bump our shoulders.

"I wasn't spying. You both were out in the open for all to see." I follow Draven, who takes quick steps in a poor attempt to escape me. "When did this happen?"

"What?"

"You and Cyan."

"What about us?"

I roll my eyes. "I saw you holding his hand. An advancement in the relationship has been made."

Draven stops, almost forcing me to run into him. I pivot around him, planting my feet firmly as if I think he'll shove me aside.

"That is none of your concern," he says, resting his hands behind his back. "Are you here to annoy me or do you need something?"

"I was hoping we could speak in private," I answer, deciding to bother Cyan about this later. He's easier to pry answers from.

Catching my drift, Draven heads for the library where he shuts and locks the door. I double check no one is around then take a seat on the couch with Draven on the chair across from me.

"I spoke with Lore this morning after our talk," I explain. "I told him I would stay under a few conditions."

That piques Draven's interest based on his curious gaze.

"What happened the other evening will not happen again. I can't handle partaking in that, though I will fight against the Holy Church when the time comes. Also, in the future, he will discuss with me what he intends to do, so we may spare those he may not have."

Draven relaxes in the chair, as if somehow has taken half a century worth of worry from his shoulders. I suppose I have. "Good," he says, nodding, eyes closed in ease. "I am... grateful that you've decided to stay."

"I still think Cyan should be informed of all this," I say, not missing the immediate clenching of Draven's hands against the arms of the chair. "When he discovers the truth, which we all know he will eventually, it will harm your finally budding relationship."

Draven squirms.

"Protecting him is a sweet thought, but also insulting because Cyan is capable of protecting himself and he will want to protect you too."

"I know."

Rising, I risk patting Dravens' shoulder. When he makes no move to rip my arm off, which he would have failed at but that doesn't mean I want to

witness an attempt, I offer a smile and say, "Make sure to think this through."

Then I leave, only to make a beeline for Cyan's workshop. I fling open the doors, discovering the mad scientist at the front of the cathedral surrounded by beakers containing bubbling liquids of varying colors. One he grasps in a gloved hand while the other hand grasps an unknown mineral. Regardless of the questionable chemical he has, I shout, "Congratulations!"

"On what?" Cyan asks, skeptically. He drops the rock in the beaker that glows and shakes.

"Your official dating status with Draven, of course!"

Cyan's cheeks take on a festering red color, as does the cathedral when he catches it ablaze in a poor attempt to burn me to a crisp.

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Seren has learned a bit about the new leader of the Red Moon, Ristain. Lore thinks they have a better shot now. Is it a good idea to work with them? And Seren has seen Draven and Cyan together lol Will Draven talk to Cyan about everything that's going on?

94. The Red Moon

Four days after Lore revealed the truth, he sets up the transporter to use late in the night.

"Remember, Ristain may be level headed, but even now not everyone he commands is as open minded as he is. There will be those who oppose your assistance," Lore explains.

"I'm sure there will be, so is it such a good idea to meet with them now? Is there not a way to gain their trust by other means?" I ask, curious with myself if I'm stalling or not.

Members of Red Moon have attacked my friends before--although doubtful they would consider me a friend now. The Red Moon has attacked me, tried to kill me, though that was when I was a member of church. Not much time has passed. They may see me as too much of a risk, as a possible traitor and a snitch ready to retreat to the church.

"Speaking bluntly, you could tear Trinia Cathedral down to her foundations and I bet there would be many still against you," Lore admits, offering an apologetic smile that I mirror. He rests a gentle hand on my shoulder, easing the tension. "However, we must still attempt to earn that trust by attending their meetings, listening to their words, and going through with their plans once they are made."

Nodding, Lore and I enter the portal, though I continue wondering if this is the best course of action. I've yet to determine a better path either, so for now this is what we must do.

Lore and I step into a cellar, dark and damp, lit by candles rather than lamps. A round table rests at the center of the room overwhelmed by papers that can't be seen through the bodies lingering by them. Three vampires, a mage, and two dhampir preside over the table with a handful more crowded at the front of the room near the staircase. All eyes turn to me, most silent in

their examination while others scream vicious intent that they never risk to give.

"Lord Seymour, I'm glad you could join us this evening," a man speaks at the farthest end of the table. He comes into view as Lore and I approach. This must be Ristain, an orange-eyed vampire with deep black skin and a thick beard around his strong jaw. He stands taller than the rest, even Lore and possibly Draven, with wide shoulders and arms that could crush a grown man. A heavy longsword rests on his back that even I would struggle to wield. The tip of the handle glistens ruby red.

"As are we," Lore says, standing at the table. I take my place beside him, trying not to match the woman's glare beside me. From here, I decipher the papers. They're blueprints of Trinia Cathedral and others across the kingdom.

Lore gestures towards me. "This is Seren Farshine--"

"A paladin of the Holy Church," the dhampir woman beside me literally spits on my shoes.

"Not anymore," I correct her, knocking the side of my shoe against the floor to get rid of some of her gift.

"He should not be here," she growls, pointing her words towards Ristain. "You risk everything by agreeing to this."

"Everything we do risks our end, Marthia," Ristain argues. "A once paladin of the Holy Church is exactly what we need."

"Because you wish to infiltrate Trinia Cathedral?" I ask, reaching for the blueprint. Ristain nods, so I add, "I am what you need because these blueprints aren't accurate. None of them are. The church purposefully changes builders mid construction and prevents the state with false blueprints. Only those who regularly roam the halls are aware of what lies within to prevent situations such as this."

"He could be lying," a man claims across the table, the mage.

"If you're all going to question Seren's loyalty, we will happily take our leave," Lore says, though his eyes do not carry the same sweetness as his voice. His hand on my back, however, rests gently, as if to tell me that he's proud. "I will not let us be so openly insulted, Ristain. If you wish for our help, I suggest you muzzle your dogs," he finishes.

A series of curses and snarls flow through the room, all silenced by a single, quiet command from Ristain, "Silence."

And the room listens. They lower their eyes when Ristain stands tall, a towering man that could strike fear in the strongest warrior. Narrow eyes examine every person, challenging them to dare meet his gaze. None accept.

"We are not babbling infants incapable of understanding our position," he says sternly. "How long have we worked for a moment such as this? To have the once enemy on our side, to have one who has been fighting our enemy more successfully than we have on our side? And now you try to squander this opportunity due to the same reasons we fight, because you are judging without proof. I will say this once more and never again; if Lord Seymour trusts Seren, then so do I, and if any do not condone my commands, they may leave now and know the consequences should they talk."

When none dare to argue, Ristain rests a hand over his chest. "Now, for introductions that should have already been given. I am Ristain. This is Arik, Linuh, Marthia, Kalan, and Jasyn. They are my generals, each tasked to overlook separate divisions of our organization."

I can take a guess about some; Arik, the mage, likely handles the humans and mages. Marthia has a strong build to her and more weapons on her than I can count, so she's a fighter. Linuh has grime under her nails, and though Lore separates us, I can smell gunpowder so perhaps explosives or tech? She and Cyan would probably get along. The remaining two, Kalan and Jasyn, are more of a mystery that I choose not to ask about. They probably won't like me snooping around.

"Our current discussion this evening does concern infiltration, though we've yet to decide on the true purpose," Ristain explains, nodding at Kalan.

"Our sources claim that Valyork's children grow more and more restless, especially after the," Kalan hesitates, licking his lips nervously. "Display that Sir Farshine had while in Vexsis."

"Seren is fine," I interrupt, which Kalan doesn't seem to mind based on his crooked smile. Marthia though, she continues to narrow her red eyes.

"Seren then," Kalan says. "Much of the public agrees with them. The vampires wish to start another war. Should that happen, the church will become even more powerful as the public grows desperate to defend themselves."

"I still do not see how this isn't a good thing," Jasyn speaks up. "Let the vampires and the church fight. There is talk that the new Warlords are a grand feat. Though a paladin can stand against them, there are not enough to defend against thousands of Warlords."

"And who will stand against those Warlords after the last of the mages are scrounged up to be used as cattle for Vexsis?" Marthia argues, which surprises me. "We must act now. Destroy the church and the monarchy. Vexsis loses their supply of mortal slaves. The people have the power, mages roam free of the church's control, and should the vampires attack, there will be no Holy Church left to abuse the public."

"Less it becomes a rallying cry to reform the church," Lore chimes in. "And if the vampires plan to attack so soon, can we afford to tear our government to pieces and hope that we can pick up what's left to form a viable defense?"

"There is no easy path," Ristain says, pressing his hands against the table. "I find our best bet is to take one down at a time; the church being our primary target. They hold too much power and cast away who could be valuable ally's for the vampires to feed on. Once the church falls, the monarchy will remain as a deterrent, for the time being."

"Are we not worried that the monarchy won't scoop up mages next?" Marthia asks. "Without the church searching for them, they may yet strike a law forcing mages to serve for the royals."

"That may be the case, but how will they control those mages?" I respond, somewhat nervous under such scrutiny. I've been part of strategized attacks and defenses before, but always on the opposing side. Always against the very people I'm not helping.

"The church has controlled mages through brainwashing and fear from impressionable youths or desperate and lost souls," I explain. "The monarchy will not be capable of any of that after the truth has been so newly released about the church. The public will be much more on guard, wishing not to be betrayed again."

Ristain nods, easing a smidge of my tension. "Our plan now must not be to wreak havoc, but to acquire all the proof we can concerning the church's transgressions to reveal to the public. We cannot make the Holy Church appear as the victim, so we must show them to be the abusers," he says.

"What kind of proof are you hoping to find?" I ask. "Most are already aware that the church puts their members through harsh training, although I doubt many know the true extent of that training. Are you hoping to photograph some of it? Would that be enough?"

"If we can, yes, however, we're aware that we need more proof than a few damning pictures. That's why we're more so interested in finding those willing to speak against the church. Whether they have left or are current outspoken members, as well as papers on all the church has hidden concerning their members. The champions, especially," he explains.

The champions... Olere... Lore's hand brushes against my leg beneath the table. No doubt he knows who I'm worrying about.

"Why the champions?" I ask, hesitantly.

"They're the highest ranked officials beside the Prophet, who we doubt we can get any dirt on," Kalan replies, making me consider that he's the spy

master. He did speak of spies earlier. "We've spotted some of the champions abusing their station or going against their faith behind closed doors. If we can show that the highest officials of their beloved church are corrupt, the public will lose faith in them."

"This is about so much more than burning that cathedral to the ground. We must destroy their belief in a system they've always held dear," Ristain adds. He nods at Jasyn, who grabs a few papers to pass along to me. The papers contain a list of names and locations that Ristain explains, "Currently, we have loved ones of mages who left the church that have gone missing. They've agreed to step forward, but they aren't enough to convince everyone."

"While it's great that some are stepping forward, are we not worried about what may happen to them?" Lore asks, glancing around the table. "The church won't openly cause them harm, but the monarchy will be sure to teach them a lesson, one way or the other."

"We've already considered this. Those willing to speak will declare that, should anything happen to them, it's proof that what they say to be true. We will also have Red Moon members watching over them to ensure their safety," Marthia explains, though her words cause Linuh and Jasyn to bristle.

Jasyn is the first to argue, "Yes, we considered this, but we did not all agree to those terms. It's too dangerous."

"Agreed." Linuh firmly nods. "We do not have the numbers necessary to protect all who we need to speak out. And by protecting them, we risk our own members prior to our inevitable battle against the Holy Church when we will need all the soldiers we can muster."

"I find all this to be very tedious," Jasyn adds, tapping a taloned nail against the table. "There is no guarantee that we can convince a kingdom so wrapped around the church's finger to go against them. People have spoken out before in droves, hundreds and thousands even after the Vampire Wars ended. Is this not all a waste?"

"What else do you propose?" Ristain asks.

"That we burn Trinia to the ground!" Jasyn slams his hand against the table so brutally that the wood splinters. "That we attack as many cathedrals as we can across the kingdom! Expose what we wish afterwards when their forces are scattered."

Those near the staircase appear to agree, nodding and whispering amongst themselves. Linuh nods too. A light sparkles in her red eyes that remind me of Cyan when he's about to get into a lot of trouble. My eyes may appear the same right now because I know not everyone will like what I have to say.

"If you think attacking the cathedrals will scatter the Holy Church's forces, you are wrong," I state, meeting Jasyn's fierce gaze. His eyebrow twitches the more I speak, "The church trains their forces under grueling conditions, always reminding them that our homes could be attacked at any moment. You will not scatter them. You will infuriate them and they will respond with a brute force that you cannot match."

I would know. I was a part of that brute force. Once sent to quell a rebellion in a neighboring town to the capital. I'm reminded of Roemithia, who showed that version of me in my memories. A man capable of endless destruction, a man who enjoyed that destruction and that is who they would summon should they be so reckless.

"Seren's right," Lore agrees, though that doesn't temper the anger in the room. "The Red Moon has used brute force since its founding and it has yet to work. One must accept after so many attempts that the results will not change. While this way may be slower than we want, while we all desire to see Trinia burn, it is not time for it. We must methodically weave our webs."

"We needn't agree on everything tonight," Ristain says, gesturing towards me. "First, I would like for Seren to draw up accurate maps for as many cathedrals as you can. If you know of where we may find important documents concerning the champions, please detail those."

I nod, eager to get to work after lounging about at the Seymour estate the last few days.

"We will convene here again in a week's time to further discuss." Ristain waves his hand and the room scatters towards the entrance without another word. Though a few do observe me either with curiosity or contempt.

I head for the transporter until I notice Lore doesn't follow. Glancing over my shoulder, I catch him being held up by Ristain. I almost step towards them until I barely catch Ristain's whispered question, "How is Arline doing?"

The leader of the Red Moon knows Arline?

"Well. She enjoys tending to the children, helps keep her mind at ease," Lore answers, though their following words are drowned out by chatter. The conversation is so brief that I haven't the time to recover from my shock before Lore approaches me.

"Shall we go?" He asks, resting a hand against the small of my back. He eases me forward through the red mist without waiting for a response. We return to his room where he recovers the transporter.

"What was that about Arline back there?" I inquire, puzzling Lore. "I heard Ristain ask how she was doing. How do they know each other?"

Lore opens and closes his mouth, frowning. "While I will share my secrets with you, Seren, I will not share the secrets of others. Arline's past is not mine to discuss. However," he approaches me to grab my shoulders. "It is in your best interest not to mention working with the Red Moon or Ristain in front of Arline."

"Is it in our best interest not to inform her and Cyan about what's going on?" I counter, making Lore's frown worse. "This cannot be hidden from them forever."

Quick note everyone! My patreon exclusive, The Cursed Prince, has begun on my patreon. You can read the first episode for free. After this chapter, it will be part of the $3 tier, which means you will have access to The Cursed Prince and any extra scenes/info, as well as early updates to Out of the Office Romance (which will be released in a few weeks) and this series, which is completed on patreon. If you're interested or just want to read the first chapter, use the external link I left, if it's available, or go to patreon.com/Twoony ^_^

Seren has met members of the Red Moon. Arline somehow knows Ristain. Some plans have been discussed, but no matter what they do the path ahead is an arduous one. Will Lore give in and tell Arline and Cyan about what's going on?

95. Into the Fold

Sighing, Lore takes a seat on the bed. He stares at the floor as I further explain my reasoning, "Leaving Arline and Cyan in the dark when we may potentially set ourselves up to be attacked does more harm than good, doesn't it? I still don't understand why you've never told them."

"I planned to tell Cyan. He has proven that he can handle himself and, out of everyone, I also feel he has the right to know the truth," Lore admits. "However, I worried Draven would not be able to handle Cyan's involvement. He'd become preoccupied with protecting Cyan and thus more likely to put himself in harm's way for that very reason."

I suppose I can see where he's coming from there.

"Arline, it's a bit more complicated with her," he adds, running his hand through his hair. "Let's just say she would not agree with me working alongside the Red Moon."

Because she has some ties with them somehow. I know Arline was also adopted, or at least fostered by Lore based on the wall of plaques I saw in the school house. Her name was up there, but I don't know how old she was when she arrived, where she's from, or what her life was like before coming here. Out of everyone, she's the person I know the least.

"She's happiest here, and frankly a back up plan. If anything were to happen to me, if the children needed protecting, then Arline is here to do that," he finishes.

Taking a seat beside him, I grasp his hand. "Yes, and that is why she needs to be as prepared as possible. Both of them do. We're too far into this to risk being taken off guard."

Lore hesitates, continuing to ponder this dilemma. It makes me think of before; how he was so adamant that his children will live happily. Though Draven, Arline, and Cyan are grown, it doesn't change the promise Lore

likely made to himself. He worries about all of them and maybe that's holding him back more than he realizes.

"They're not children anymore, Lore. Far from it," I say, noting the tension in his shoulders. "Arline and Cyan can fend for themselves. Draven may be uncomfortable, but he has to also realize what is best for us. And yes, we must also warn Cyan and Arline; let them choose if they want to be a part of this fight."

When Lore doesn't respond, I rest my head on his shoulder. He glances at me, eyes dark and distant, lost in thought. This isn't easy for him. None of this has ever been, even after all that he has done. It's not easy for me either. Though I've trained, I've taken lives before, this is bigger than all of us. This is risking everything.

"You don't need to make your decision tonight. Think about it and we can talk more tomorrow, if you want," I suggest, placing a quick kiss on his cheek. "It's late anyway. We should get some sleep."

Nodding, Lore gets up to head for the bathroom. He hesitates in the doorway, giving me a curious stare. "Are you joining me?"

I smile. "I suppose I should. It'd be a waste of water otherwise."

Lore chuckles, taking my hand when I grow close to tug me along behind him.

I know Lore doesn't get much sleep that night. He accidentally wakes me a few times from tossing and turning. I try to ease his discomfort by curling my arms around his waist, holding him flush against me. He stops squirming so much, but I hear him sigh or hum every now and again. Sometime in the night, someone knocks at our door. We didn't unlock it after we returned, though I suppose that's a good thing considering I'm half asleep watching Lore hurry out of bed to greet one of the children before they realize he isn't alone in here.

"Papa, I had a nightmare," Oliver says between sniffles. "I wanna sleep here with you."

"How about we sleep in your room?" Lore suggests.

"No! There's monsters in there. It's scary. I wanna sleep here."

I hear the door squeak open in Oliver's attempt to get into the room. I sit up, noticing Lore has picked Oliver up so his attention is on him, but Lore catches my gaze. All I can give is a nervous shrug, not sure if I should hop out the damn window or accept our fate. Though Oliver kind of makes that decision for us by turning around, revealing that he has Missy in his arms.

"Hi Seren," he says, rubbing his tired eyes. "Did you have a nightmare too?" I bite my lip, keeping back a chuckle when Oliver makes a fairly sound argument, "If Seren can sleep here, I should be able to sleep with Papa too."

Lore releases a puff of nervous air. "I suppose that's true."

Lore leaves the door slightly open seeing as we don't want to lock Missy in here. He approaches the bed, letting Oliver scurry over the mattress to make himself comfortable next to me. Missy remains in his arms, also making herself comfortable beside him once I've covered Oliver in blankets. He wiggles his feet, smiling when Lore gets back into bed to rest an arm over him. Oliver looks back at me, grabs my arm, and puts it over him too.

"There," he happily declares. "Now we're all safe from the monsters."

Oliver hugs Missy close, who doesn't so much as squeak, seeming more than content with her face against Oliver's. And he's asleep in half a second.

"That went better than expected," I whisper, smiling at Lore's slow nod.

"I told you that you worry too much," he says, scooting closer so I feel his legs against mine.

I choose not to comment on that. It's late and Lore finally looks like he might get some sleep. His eyes flutter closed, breaths evening out, then we're all asleep, warm and cuddled in bed.

Draven wakes us the next morning by knocking on the door announcing breakfast. I'm surprised by a pressure against my arm, waking abruptly to see that it's Oliver leaning over me to shout back at Draven, "Okayy!"

"Seren, it's time to wake up," he adds, smiling at me with an energy I wish I possessed so early in the morning. Then he swings over to play with Lore's hair, twirling it around his little fingers. "Papa, wakey wakey!"

"I'm up," Lore groans, proving that he isn't really up. He's barely conscious, same as me. Oliver's squirming wakes us fairly quickly though. He crawls over me, almost sending his knee into my ribcage, giggling all the while. Missy must have left sometime during the night because she's gone, but there's a furry imprint on the bed.

We all wake for our usual morning breakfast where Oliver makes no mention of sleeping in bed with me and Lore. I don't know if he'll tell the older kids, like Isabella and Darika, who will definitely be able to put the pieces together. Possibly Reegan and Hyun Woo too. I don't know how they will react to that, so I guess we'll see?

I try not to think of it, focusing on tending to the children. From time to time, I look to Lore. Though he smiles and speaks to the kids, there's a darkness to his eyes, the same as last night. He's still thinking about it. Though it appears he has come to a decision when breakfast ends. He requests that Draven and I follow him to his office. We all take a seat, me next to Lore and Draven on the couch across from us. I'm assuming Lore has come to a decision based on his soft scowl.

"Seren and I have decided to inform Arline and Cyan about what has been going on," Lore says, making me feel warm for some reason. I guess because he said we decided on it, that he took what I said into heavy consideration. It's nice. "It's safest for all of us if they are aware, if they know what might be coming our way."

"You're aware that Cyan will want to take part in our plans, right?" Draven asks. His hands tense on his lap, slipping into tight fists.

Lore nods. "He'll attend jobs with you, if that makes you more comfortable."

I don't think Draven will ever be comfortable with Cyan being anywhere near this mess. However, Draven gives a reluctant nod that reminds me of Lore's hesitancy last night.

"Are we certain about telling Arline? She isn't..." Draven hesitates, then sighs. "Fond of the Red Moon. She is aware that we have dangerous jobs, that something could happen to us, so she's already prepared."

"This is a lot bigger than anything we've done," Lore mumbles, showing that he doesn't like what he has to do. "She should know."

Lore calls for a maid, requesting for her to call Cyan and Arline while she'll keep an eye on the kids for a moment. I'm surprised he didn't send Draven. Though once I notice how stiff his shoulders are, I understand. Lore must not have wanted Draven to be the bearer of what he considers to be bad news.

A few tense moments later, Cyan and Arline arrive, both confused on why they've been called. Cyan sits next to Draven and Arline next to him.

"What's going on?" Cyan asks, glancing between everyone with the typical eyes of scientific curiosity. One can see the gears turning in his head, calculating all the reasons they could have been summoned.

Leaning forward, Lore requests that Cyan and Arline listen to everything before they speak. Both agree. Lore looks to me. I give him a reassuring nod, then he reveals the truth of what has happened. What the Holy Church and the monarchies are doing, how we wish to work with the Red Moon, that we aren't entirely sure what the exact plans are yet, but this is a big moment. A time where something may finally be done against those who have been abusing us, abusing everyone for so long. We need to be prepared for what may happen, if we succeed or fail.

I watch their reactions, Cyan going from shocked, disgusted, upset, and downright furious. Red in the face, he glances at Draven, obviously

bothered that even he had been keeping secrets from Cyan. That pained expression drifts back to Lore, but he keeps his promise and remains silent.

Arline is similar, confusion and anger, though that anger heats the room when Lore mentions the Red Moon. One sees it in her eyes; the disbelief that Lore would suggest such a thing, let alone go through with it. She shakes her head, eyes clenched shut as if she wished to wake from a bad dream. But Lore continues and her hands shake in her lap.

When Lore finishes, I don't know who will speak first. Cyan and Arline must have a lot to say.

"How could you work with them?" Arline asks, her voice low though her tone trembles with the desire to scream. She shakes, jaw set and teeth grinding behind her lips. The more she speaks, the louder she gets, "You know how they are, what the Red Moon is capable of. A group of psychotic tyrants, same as the others. They may work with you now, but the time will come when they deem you aren't useful anymore, that you're too much of a risk, and they'll abandon you. You're nothing to them, a tool to be disposed of when they're done!"

"I've taken everything they've done into consideration, Arline," Lore says sternly. "And I refused to work with them before because of that, but things have changed for all of us and I believe now is the time to take a chance. I am not saying that we trust them to always be on our side. We just need them to get the job done."

Arline glares at Lore, who maintain a calm expression. They don't break eye contact for a long, incredibly tense moment. Then Arlien huffs.

"If that's what you believe," she grunts, standing. Her eyes glisten blazing red. "But I won't help in these endeavors if they are involved and you're a fool to put the kids in harm's way."

Arline storms out of the room, leaving us in awkward silence. If Cyan had something to say earlier, he doesn't speak of it now. Our gazes drift to Lore, who leans back on the couch, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose. A vein

throbs in his forehead. I rest a hand on his arm, offering a sad smile when he looks my way.

I suppose things could have been much worse...

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Oop, Arline didn't take the news very well. What kind of past do you think she has with Ristain and the Red Moon? What will Cyan say, if anything? This story is completed on my patreon, if you wish to read it as well as all extra content available there. Just go to patreon.com/Twoony ^_^

96. A Promised Trip

Cyan POV

Yet again, I've been left in the dark about a great deal of issues. Lore, Draven, and even Seren knew of what the Holy Church has been doing, what the monarchy has been doing, and have started working to tear them apart at the seams while I was set aside. Being let into the fold should ease this frustration. Is it not proof that Lore views me as necessary for the mission? Or was he convinced by Seren? Because I can easily imagine him arguing on my behalf, if only because he seems to be the only one who doesn't baby me!

"Cyan," Draven calls behind me for the sixth time. I've been counting ever since I left Lore's office, meandering around the estate with no clear destination, though I find my feet carrying me towards my lab.

"Cyan, wait," he repeats. The tip of his fingers brush mine. I yank my arm away, pivoting on my heel. Not expecting my sudden stop, Draven stumbles past me. He catches himself and hesitates to face me, eyes downcast because he knows I'm upset.

"Why did you lie to me?" I ask, crossing my arms. "And don't give me that bullshit that you wanted to protect me."

"How is that bullshit?" Draven counters.

"Because how is lying to me protection?! We both know what the Holy Church is capable of, you apparently even more than me! And now the monarchies too. How is leaving me in the dark protection when any of them could have hurt me? Could have hurt you or even killed you!"

Draven tries to reach for me again. I refuse, adamantly shaking my head. "Don't," I declare, teeth clenched. "That was completely unfair and you know it. If anything had happened, especially to you and Lore, Arline and I would have known nothing. We would have been on our own, capable of

taking a guess of what transpired, but never truly knowing how deep this conspiracy goes. That was fucked up, of both of you! Sometimes you just..." I throw my arms wildly in the air, incapable of containing the emotions. Then I point accusingly at the orange-eyed bastard. "I wonder how your brain must feel brand new seeing as you rarely fucking use it, you greasy toerag!"

If Draven is at all insulted, he doesn't show it. Maintaining an apologetic frown, he says, "I'm sorry, Cyan."

"If you knew you'd be sorry for lying to me, then why lie?"

"Because I did want to protect you, not just from them but this life in general. I hated when His Grace involved you with some of our jobs. There was always a risk and always a chance we'd have to harm or kill and I didn't want you to go through that. I didn't trust myself either," he replies, puzzling me.

"What do you mean?"

He hesitates to respond, gaze drifting about the yard before landing on me again. "I'm distracted when you're around, worrying about you rather than focusing on the mission. If I get hurt, you might too. I became increasingly paranoid."

I suppose I can't blame him. I get worried too, wondering if he has rested enough for the next mission. There's always something happening, always something he has to do and I want to help. I want to ease the expectations he mostly set upon himself.

"As sickenly sweet as that sentiment is, this shouldn't have been hidden from Arline and me for so long," I say, tugging on the sleeve of his jacket. His fingers glide across my palm, a now familiar feeling that I'm happy to say doesn't send me into a spiral. Though when he links our fingers, there's always this itch in the back of my mind that I desperately try to ignore.

"I want to help. I should be able to help. You know how I feel about the Holy Church. I went through a lot there. I saw what others went through,

and now to learn of what they're doing, what the monarchies are doing, we all need to work together to burn them to the ground," I say.

"I suppose if there is any burning involved, you have the most experience," he teases, making me smile.

"Shut up." I risk taking a step forward to rest my forehead against his chest. He's cool, colder than the early breeze.

"I'm sorry," he repeats.

"I know. I suppose your apology is accepted."

He chuckles. I feel it through his chest, enjoying the soft rumble. He makes no movement to leave there. I retreat, peering up at him to find his lips set into a thin line. Does he have more to say? I'm unsure, so I remain here, waiting.

"Should we win," he says.

"When we win," I correct him.

He nods. "Okay, when we win, I plan to leave the estate for a while."

"What?" I ask, releasing his hand. The air suddenly feels unbearably cold. "Why? Where to?"

"I don't know yet, but I was hoping you would come with me."

I don't know what to say, mouth opening and closing like a kid recently learning how to open and close doors. Draven has never shown signs of disliking the estate, of wanting to leave. Why now?

"I've been thinking about it for a while," he adds. "I've done a lot of work here, work that I'm proud of doing alongside His Grace, but honestly, I do think I need a vacation. Some time away to travel again."

Well, I do agree that he needs time off. I just never imagined he would want to leave to do that. Maybe take a week to lounge about the estate or travel

the city, but to leave entirely? Will the estate even run without him? He's the backbone of this place!

"How long would we be gone? What would we even do?" I ask.

"Whatever we want." He takes my hand again, squeezing it. "Travel to the ocean, across the sea, whatever we wish to do. We'll come back when we've rested. I know Lore's doors will always be open to us."

I'm surprised he said Lore. It's always My Lord or His Grace, something to show Draven's extreme respect, though I guess even he admits to himself every now and again that Lore is the man who helped raise us. The one who would make sure we could travel and do whatever we want to do, which does sound quite appealing.

"I think we'll need time once this is all over," Draven finishes, nodding. "A break for the both of us."

"I'd like that," I say, smiling, already eager for something we may not get for a while, though I'm sure it will be worth the wait.

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Cyan and Draven have had a talk. When all this is over, he wants to go on a trip. Look at our boys planning a sweet vacation together, how cute! I honestly just wanted a moment for them since they haven't had a lot and shit is starting to go down so I hope you enjoyed them as much as I do. ^_^

97. Arline's Past

Seren POV

With Cyan and Arline gone, that leaves Lore and I alone. I take his hand, offering what I hope to be a reassuring smile.

"It will take some time, but they'll come to understand," I say, squeezing his hand.

"Right." Sighing, Lore rises to head for his desk. He falls into the chair, flipping through some papers that I doubt he registers.

"I'm going to work on those maps that Ristain requested of me," I explain, getting up as well. Lore looks like he needs some space. Everyone probably does, so I take my leave. The library will probably be my best bet, somewhere quiet that others likely won't find me. However, after scrounging up some paper and ink, I discover Arline seated on one of the couches in the library. Her legs are curled up on the cushion, eyes distant until they drift to me. I figured she'd head back to the school house, but in her state it is probably best that she not tend to the children. She needs rest too.

"Uh, sorry for disturbing you," I say, gesturing over my shoulder. "I'll go somewhere else."

"Why did you agree with him?" she asks, preventing me from leaving. She stares me down, brows deeply furrowed. "You've fought against the Red Moon. You know what they're like and they must hate you, so why are you working with them?"

I shut the library doors and head towards her, taking a seat on the opposite end of the couch. I sit everything down on the table in front of us. She watches me with curious and frustrated eyes.

"I've only met with some of the members once," I admit. "Ristain has made it very clear that we're to work together and if anyone has a problem, they're welcome to leave."

Arline looks away when I mention Ristain.

"I don't fully trust them either. Trust takes time to build. Considering what we hope to do, I'm sure that trust will be built overtime. For now, we have to work together to, as Lore said it, get this job done. You do realize we can't fight the church and the monarchies without more help, don't you?"

"We could find help from almost anyone else that would be better," she says, grinding her teeth.

"Why?" I ask. She squirms, one hand tensing against the arm of the couch. "When I met with the Red Moon, Ristain asked about you."

She rolls her shoulders.

"He wanted to know how you were doing. Obviously you have a past with them, what is it?"

Arline abruptly stands, approaching a nearby window to gaze at the quiet yard. She crosses her arms, almost hugging herself, remaining silent for a few long moments.

"My parents were both once part of the Red Moon," she explains, her voice softer than a whisper. "They ceased their missions upon learning that they were expecting. They settled down to raise me, but they still did what they could for the Red Moon by being a safe house. I never knew about the hidden rooms under the house, a place where members could rest, heal, or hide weapons. When I was nine, members of the Holy Church raided our home after having *acquired* information from another member."

She spat out the word acquired as if the very word threatened to taint her tongue. Her eyes flash violent red, fingers digging into her arms to break skin.

"They tortured my parents for more information, but my mom was always a fighter. She distracted them while I ran, only to see a champion ride into town a few hours later with my mother's head on a spike." She glances at me, hatred in her eyes. I can't say I blame her. At the end of the day, we both know I've done terrible things. That I've tortured vampires for information, that I've relieved many of their heads. Regardless, she continues her story and that makes me believe that she trusts me, at least more than she once did.

"Ristain grabbed me before I did something stupid. For a while, I worked with them and prepared to take the fight to the church, but the more I was among them the more I realized how pathetic they were. We never achieved anything. We'd take the life of a priest or a holy knight, but how many of us died? How many children like me lost their parents, only to be recruited by the same group that they died for? In my eyes, they weren't much different than the church. They didn't try to heal us. They just weaponized our rage." She looks at me again, like she hopes that I'll agree and I do. It was wrong of the Holy Church to use my rage as a means to train me and it was wrong of the Red Moon to do the same.

"We were so powerless that we couldn't save many of our members," she continues, walking back to the couch to take her previous seat. She wrings her hands together in front of her. "They were left to die, like my parents, and if they were incapable of fighting they were left behind to fend for themselves. We didn't have the means to care for people who couldn't fight for the cause. That's why I'm telling you that they will abandon you. If you become a risk, if you can't fight, they won't care for you. There's no loyalty among them."

"There's loyalty among us though, isn't there?" I ask. "You, Draven, Cyan, Lore and me. We're going to take care of each other, no matter what."

"Isn't that a bit naive? You said we need their numbers. The five of us can't stand against the church, let alone the monarchies too."

"That's right, but if the time comes that we realize we can't achieve this, the five of us will have each other. We'll do what we must to take care of the

children. I imagine Lore could find us a new place to live on another continent, maybe somewhere by the ocean."

Arline snorts. "Doubtful. He'd have a panic attack thinking about the children going in on their own."

Oh, now I'm worrying about that. Have any of the children had swimming lessons?

"You're right, that'd be a terrible decision. We'll live in the woods, far from deep water," I say, making her release a rigid giggle.

The tense atmosphere has lessened, though Arline's shoulders remain stiff. One can easily see the anguish in her eyes, that this is about more than her. She has her doubts about the Red Moon. If we're working with them, she sees that as a risk upon all our lives and the safety of the children. That much is obvious based on what she said to Lore, that he's a fool to put them in danger. That hurt him, though I know he must have considered this time and time again. Maybe it's the bigger reason he never worked with the Red Moon, the realization of what it may cause for the children. In the end, we're making a better world for them though. A place where they can all feel safe. Taking a chance, I move closer to Arline. She glances at me, confused when I rest my hand on hers. She lets me though and that's another good sign.

"You know Lore would never force you to work with them if you do not want to," I say, smiling when she immediately nods. "And I wouldn't either. In fact, Lore didn't want to tell you because he knew it would upset you, that you're happy here protecting the children, and he knew you'd continue to do so if something happened to us. I'm the one who convinced him to tell you because I think you should know the truth, that you should be prepared, not because either of us expect you to suddenly work alongside the Red Moon."

"I know that we all care very much for the children," I add. "I know that this is dangerous, but the world is dangerous for them too. We might be able to change that, to help make a world that's more accepting of all of them."

She sighs, never replying. This is a lot for everyone, so I pat her hand and tell her that I'll go check on the kids. I'll work on the maps later. She can stay here and rest. Arline gives me a soft smile, one that she has never shown before. So much progress has been made. Feels like I've crossed the finish line, but that moment of triumph is ruined by a deafening blast; one that shakes the very foundation beneath our feet, causing the mansion to creak and groan as if it's in pain. Arline and I shout, both overcome by the loud noise that makes our ears ring, though it must be far worse for her. She stumbles from the couch, hands slapped over her ears.

What was that?

"Find the children!" I order even if Arline's already on it. When we burst out of the library doors, smoke fills the halls, not just debris from the explosion but from a fire. Coughing, I cast a swift spell on both of us, shielding us with golden light.

Arline runs in the opposite direction towards the school house while I follow the smoke. My heart hammers in my chest when I realize where it's coming from, where I see flames licking the walls, threatening to consume our home.

"Lore!" I scream, staring down the blazing hall leading to his office. I want to search for him, but I have to tend to these flames first. They may reach the schoolhouse. Holding out my hands, I prevent the flames from going any further. That's when Cyan and Draven appear behind me.

"What's going on?! Where are the kids?!" Cyan shouts.

"In the schoolhouse. Arline has gone to them. Lore, I think... there was an explosion. It might have come from his office. I don't know where he is. He might still be in there," I speak so quickly that it's a miracle any of them heard me. "Draven, I need you to turn on every damn faucet in this house."

Draven rushes towards the kitchens. Cyan knows what to do without my having to help him. As I hold back the flames, he summons the water that flows out of the rooms in giant streams. The water forms a hovering ball

behind us. When he has enough, he throws the water down the hall. The flames hiss and he forces open the doors so I can push the smoke out.

I hurry through the debris, crumbled walls scattered about. Almost the entirety of the wall has fallen, revealing the front of the manor. I can't breathe and it has nothing to do with the taste of ash. I search everywhere among the rubble, pushing through rock to get to Lore's office, but when I arrive the office doesn't exist anymore. The room has completely caved in, nothing more than broken glass, wood, and stone.

"Lore!" I scream, stumbling through the debris when, through the settling dust, I spot him lying bloody and broken.

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Hello, hello friends! I'll have a new free to read novel coming out tomorrow, Out of the Office Romance, so keep your eyes open for the notification (if Wattpad sends it,) or check in to see when it's posted! Anywho, we learned a bit about Arline's past and how she's tied to the Red Moon, but now there has been an explosion and Lore is hurt! What's going to happen next?

98. The Warning

"Lore," I whimper, running past the debris into the yard. He must have been at his desk. The explosion sent him out the window, away from the flames and the rubble. An odd best case scenario, though that doesn't mean he's unharmed, quite the opposite.

There's too much blood. Vampires have unnatural healing abilities, dhampir a little less so. They are more easily overwhelmed. Lore is now, motionless in my arms. Injuries have long since stopped bothering me, but this is different. Seeing the bone of Lore's left arm pierce out of skin, the unnatural twist to his right leg, and a gash oozing blood from his temple leaves me gasping for breath. I need to focus now more than ever. Healing has never been my strong suit. I focused on offensive and defensive spells, leaving the healing to priests. We had a system that worked. Now I wish I had learned more, to be more than a sputtering mess over Lore's wheezing body.

Sometime during the chaos, Cyan and Draven have joined me. Cyan tends to a wound on Lore's side that I didn't even see, muttering his own spells with tears building in his eyes. Draven stands near the road, glancing continuously between us and the path. I can't imagine why until I hear the sirens. He has already called the authorities.

"Did you call for an ambulance?!" I shout, feeling a fool because why wouldn't he? But Draven takes no offense to my question and responds in the affirmative, also informing me that the children are alright. Arline has kept them in the schoolhouse alongside as many workers as she or Draven could find. Some are missing, hopefully having run from the explosion rather than getting caught in it. They found the animals too, luckily unharmed though understandably shaken.

Moments later, an ambulance comes peeling into the lot, followed by police cars. I don't want to hand Lore over. My hands shake grasping the gurney they use to lift him. He groans from the movement, somehow making me more of an anxious wreck. I should be glad that he's making noise, that he's

alive, but knowing he's in pain has my stomach twisting into a knot. When I grab the handle to the doors to lift myself into the back with him, Draven grasps my shoulder.

"You should stay here," he says, somehow not flinching under my heated glare.

"What?" I hiss, grasping the door handle so tightly that it bends.

"You and Cyan can use magic to uncover the explosive and maybe whoever attacked far better than I or any of these officers can. I will go with His Grace. I won't leave his side."

He's right. I know that he's right. The officers have few mages with them, though none likely as trained as I am. The church always scoops up the powerful mages for their own ranks, leaving less powerful mages to work jobs like this, making the police even more reliant on the church. Making everyone more reliant on the church. Everyday I find another way for the church to piss me off. Cyan is a great mage, but not like me. We all know that. It's why even Cyan gives a slow nod behind Draven, but I don't want to stay. I want to be with Lore. I need to be with him if... if things don't--

"And if there's another attack, you will be here for the children," Draven adds, once again right. He gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. The medics insist we must make up our minds immediately. Lore needs emergency surgery. That's what forces me away when all I want to do is cling to him. Draven jumps into the vehicle and it flies as quickly out of the lot as when it arrived.

Once the ambulance is gone, Jaryl, the lead officer of the precinct that Lore and I worked with on the Ayden Marshalls case, approaches us. He gives a respectful nod while asking what transpired. I explain the situation more calmly than expected, though that may be because I'm not panicking anymore. I'm fucking furious. Someone attacked our home. Someone hurt Lore. Someone could have hurt the children. Whoever it was will pay dearly for their transgressions.

Jaryl takes note of my recounting of events then instructs his men to sweep the area for any more devices or anything suspicious. I should have thought of that. I've trained for hectic moments like this, but my mind's a mess. The image of Lore laying bloody and motionless won't leave my mind, won't give me a moment to think. All I see is red.

Cyan rests a hand on my back. The touch brings me back to reality. He nods towards the rubble, guiding me over to help search for bomb fragments. Our magic can do that easily enough, detecting components of metal and chemicals among the rubble. Cyan is actually best at this, seeing as he's a bit of an accidental explosive expert. As we search, the more I want to hurt the bastard who did this, the more I wish to scream.

"Seren," Cyan calls, pushing rocks aside to retrieve metal shrapnel. He has a few stashed in a bag that Jaryl's men had given us. "There's something we need to consider."

"And what is that?" I growl, all but throwing debris out of the way. When the mansion groans, I heave a steady breath in a desperate attempt to contain myself. We don't want what remains of the walls falling in on us.

"That someone planted this while they were here," he mumbles.

"And who was here who could have done that?"

Cyan's long silence has me grunting as I stumble over rubble to face him. His apologetic eyes meet mine that I do not understand until he mutters, "Olere."

My dull nails manage to pierce the skin of my palm from how tightly I clench my fists.

"I know what he means to you, but he is a member of the church who came into our home, into Lore's office. He may have planted--"

"No," I hiss, making Cyan attempt another argument that I silence with a scream. "No! He wouldn't do that!"

I return to the task at hand, digging through debris until my nails crack and bleed. "Olere is helping us," I add, breathing heavily though every breath is worse than the last. I'm breathing in dust and smoke that makes me cough. My shouting doesn't help. "And he was here many days ago. Why would the device go off now? What if we had found it between then and now? Especially with all of us..."

Stopping, I stare at what was once Lore's office, where we were...

"We were all in here before the explosion," I explain, further confused. "We could have all been taken out or at least seriously injured, which means the bomb had to be on a timer, one that couldn't be adjusted. Not advanced tech like Vexsis that could probably sense our damn body heat and definitely not magic because you and I would have sensed that easily enough."

"So a regular bomb, something the monarchy could use. They're doing the dirty work this time around too?" Cyan asks, looking at the shrapnel he has recovered. I walk over to examine mine too.

"Must be. This is metal is unenchanted, basic but effective. It must have been planted to go off as a way to scare us and if it happened to injure or kill anyone in the process..."

"Great for them," Cyan growls. "This has to be a warning to stop snooping. Have they always known that you were onto them or has something changed?"

"I don't..." Something has changed though, the very person Cyan mentioned; Olere. It isn't just me who was looking into the church, but Olere as well. I haven't heard from him either. What if the church knows we're working together? What if they attacked him too? What if this was even an attempt at a set up? Cyan immediately blamed Olere. Lore might have too. If Lore retaliated, the church would have every reason to "defend" themselves.

"We have to hurry," I say, urging Cyan to assist me. Officers search the rubble with us and two mages are scouring the mansion to check for other

devices. All give us our space, which may have more to do with the flames raging in my eyes than any form of respect or understanding.

Once Cyan and I have gathered a great deal of pieces, Cyan asks, "What now? There's nothing to show us who may have planted this."

"There might be," I reply, making Cyan tilt his head curiously. I gesture for him to hand me the pieces. He does so, resting the shrapnel in my open palms. Shutting my eyes, I focus on the rage shifting within me, a rampage of emotions that I feel within these very pieces. Whoever once held this, whoever put the bomb into place was also tormented and that torment reveals their face; one that I vaguely recognize.

"Where are the mansion workers?" I ask.

Cyan nods towards the police vehicles where a few are being questioned. Others stand by the second ambulance having any wounds attended to that, luckily, appear to be minor. Cyan stumbles after me as I storm towards the crowd. Most watch me, confused, but one man's eyes grow wide. He knows he has been caught though he doesn't run. He lowers his gaze, hands clenched tightly in front of him, and he drops to his knees before I can grab him by the neck. Cyan stops me from grabbing his shoulders and snapping the bone like twigs.

"You," I growl, throwing the shrapnel at his feet.

The butler whimpers, hands clasped in front of him as he stutters, "P-Please, understand, I-I'm sorry, I had to!"

"You had to plant a bomb?" Cyan scoffs, keeping a firm grasp on my arm. If he let go, I don't know what I'd do.

The butler nods, continuing to hold his hands up in prayer. "My family, one day I came home and they were gone. There was a picture of them beaten and bound. The bomb was there and a note that said to plant the device in His Grace's office. Once I did, they'd return my family and never bother us again so long as we kept quiet."

"A convenient excuse," I hiss, making the man peer up at me with wide, terrified eyes.

"No, no, I speak the truth!"

"We could send officers to his home to check if his family's story matches his?" one of the officers suggests.

I give the officer a nod. Cyan gives me a concerned look, mumbling, "We're cluing in whoever may have kidnapped them that he talked."

"They couldn't have seriously believed he wouldn't. This was a threat and they want us to know that." I walk back towards the mansion, away from prying eyes and listening ears. Cyan follows, joining me in the quiet of the library.

"Olere and I were snooping around. I haven't heard from him in a while. This must have been the church's way of warning us of what will happen if we continue," I explain. "Now I fear for Olere. I can't risk calling, if he's even at Trinia. The church will listen. I don't know where he is either. He might even be..." I stop myself from saying what I fear, that the monarchy or even the church may have succeeded in giving Olere a more permanent warning.

"He's a champion," Cyan reminds me. "They will need more than a bomb to handle him."

"I know."

"And they need more than a bomb to handle Lore." Cyan grabs my arm, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "He'll be fine."

I hope so. I need him to be.

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Hello, hello friends! If you're unaware, my new free to read novel, Out of the Office Romance, has started. The first chapter is available so

head over to give it a read or add to your library to be notified when it updates. It'll update twice a week on Monday and Friday. Of course, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the first chapter~

Anyway, oop, Lore is injured. The mansion has been attacked. Seren's worried about Olere. We've got quite a lot going on. Do you agree that this is a warning from a church? Will Lore be okay? Is Olere okay?

99. No Foolproof Plan

The moment Draven calls to inform us that Lore woke up, I'm on my way to the hospital. Cyan remained at the estate with Arline to keep an eye on the children and distract them. Arline didn't want to lie to them, so she admitted that Lore had to see the doctor and would be home very soon. We spent the night with the children in the schoolhouse, making a giant sleeping area so everyone felt safe and secure. Through the night, I wanted nothing more than to see Lore, hoping that him waking a day after his surgery means that he's on the road to a fast recovery.

At the hospital, Draven waits outside Lore's room. He called after Lore's surgery yesterday to inform us that it went well. The doctors aren't concerned and think Lore will be out of here in a few days thanks to the natural healing abilities of a dhampir. I wish their words gave me comfort, but I don't know if anything other than seeing Lore myself will do that.

Draven steps away when I open the door. Lore sits up in bed, a few tubes attached to his arms. Strips of gauze are wrapped around his head and his bones have been set right. His arm rests in a sling and his leg slightly perched. They didn't bother with a cast. They rarely do with vampires or dhampir and, honestly, it helps me take a very needed breath. I feel as if I've been incapable of breathing since the attack, but now that Lore smiles at me I can breathe again.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, hurrying to his bedside. The moment he raises his hand, I bring his knuckles to my lips. He chuckles and rubs my cheek, then cradles my neck to tug me forward for a quick kiss and maybe two more.

"Sore and tired, but quite well considering what happened," he replies, releasing a low groan when he leans back against the pillows. I adjust the pillows for him until he claims that he's comfortable enough.

"How is everyone doing? Draven told me the children are alright, but they must be scared. I'd much rather be with them than here," he says, taking my hand when I sit back by his side.

"Arline and Cyan are with them. We decided to have a giant sleepover in the schoolhouse. The second floor didn't take much damage, but we all felt it's better to stay clear of the debris until we know everything is stable," I explain, watching Lore's lips set into a thin line. "The doctors think you won't be here long. You'll be home in no time."

"Let's hope so. There's much to do." Lore's teeth grind behind his lips. His hand grows tense in mine. I understand the frustration, the desire to get moving and pay them back tenfold.

I head to the door, double checking that no one is outside. Then I cast a spell to shield our room from any unwanted listeners, also double checking that there are no devices or spells inside to catch what we have to say. When I sit back down, I tell Lore what I fear, "Cyan and I found shrapnel that makes us believe the monarchy was behind this. They kidnapped the family of a butler, forcing him to plant the device. It's not advanced enough to be from Vexsis and wasn't enchanted, so the monarchy makes the most sense. I fear what provoked them was what Olere and I have been doing. I worry that Olere is in trouble."

Lore gives this a moment of thought, gaze drifting to the floor then back to me. "And you can't risk calling Trinia to see if he returned safely."

"No, someone would certainly listen."

"If Olere has been discovered, or at the very least suspected, then we can't sit idly by. They have made their move and we must make ours. The transporter lies beneath my personal fireplace under a spell you can certainly break. I've already coded the transporter to respond to your presence. Retrieve it. It's already set to take you to the Red Moon hideout. Speak with Ristain, inform him of what has happened, and ask about Olere."

"Wouldn't they have told us if we were in trouble?"

"Not if they weren't aware that he was." Lore tugs on my hand in a silent request. I lean forward for a kiss, resting our foreheads together when he says, "You should take Draven with you."

"No, he needs to stay with you. Arline and Cyan have to protect the kids. I'll speak with Ristain and hopefully find Olere."

"I don't want you to go alone, not when we're now being openly attacked."

"Haven't you learned that I can handle myself?" I smile at his exaggerated eye roll, then kiss him again. "I don't want to leave you either. I'd never leave your side for the rest of our lives, if that were possible."

"That's my line," he whispers.

"I'll return as soon as I can." I give Lore one last kiss that lasts much longer than the others. I wish I could stay. That's what I wanted all night. Now with the church making their move, I sense that we won't spend the time we want with each other until this mess is over.

Draven waits outside of the room. I tell him to speak to Lore. My spell will last a while longer even after I'm gone. Then I'm on my way back to the estate, quickly explaining to Arline and Cyan that I may be gone for a few days or a few hours. Depends on if Ristain knows where Olere is or not. Arline's not as supportive of my decision as the others, but even she knows there isn't much else to do in this situation.

"What am I to tell the children?" she asks. They're playing in the schoolhouse, though not as rambunctious as usual. "With you and His Grace gone, they will grow even more uncomfortable."

"Tell them the truth; that I'm searching for a friend to make sure they're safe and I'll be back as soon as I can," I answer.

"You aren't going to say goodbye?" Cyan asks.

"Probably better that he doesn't. The kids won't take it well," Arline mumbles. She pats my back, I guess her way of saying good luck. Cyan

does the same, though he gives my shoulder a squeeze. While they go back to play with the children, I head for Lore's room.

Beneath Lore's fireplace there appears to be a stone floor. In reality, the floor is an illusionary spell. The transporter rests beyond. I touch the middle button as Lore had done then it hovers and falls to the floor, revealing the familiar red door. Like last time, when I step through I find myself in the same basement area with the round table. This time only Ristain and Marthia, who wasn't exactly my biggest fan, stand around it. Both are surprised to see me, and perhaps worried.

"Seren, what are you doing here? Where's Lord Seymour?" Ristain asks.

"He was attacked," I explain, going on to inform them of what transpired, that Lore's alright but in the hospital, and that I am worried about Olere. "Tell me you have spies keeping an eye on him and know where he is."

"Olere dropped off our radar a few days ago, which isn't that unusual. Champions and most paladins are difficult to track without getting caught so we don't often take risks to do so," Marthia replies, worsening the concern already weighing on my gut.

"This might be one of those unusual cases then," Ristain says, moving some papers around on the table. "If the monarchy attacked you, it's because they're onto you, potentially even us, or at least suspecting that there's more going on than they realized."

"That would explain Holland's movements," Marthia adds, making my blood run a little cold.

Holland is one of the oldest champions of the church. All know not to let the silver hair and crow lines fool them. He's powerful enough to potentially bring down the Prophet herself. Everyone knew the church meant business if they summoned Holland, that the battle was lost for any who dare stand against him. I was always more fearful of him than impressed. He was tough on everyone, including himself, and he has the presence of one that you know has seen and done more than most can ever imagine.

"When did he leave Trinia and where did he go?" I ask, watching Ristain read over papers that I'm guessing are reports concerning their whereabouts.

Ristain lowers his head like he's ashamed, admitting, "Holland left Trinia only three days ago, but we never have spies follow him, just keep watch in towns and report to us if they happen to see him."

Understandable. If anyone would realize they're being followed, it's Holland. If he got his hands on the spy, there's a high probability he'd get answers out of them.

"Olere fell off our radar five days ago," Marthia remarks. "He was last seen south in the state of Brinsbane."

"What would he be doing in Brinsbane?" I mumble more to myself than the others. "He said he was going to look more into missing persons, but there are no records of importance down there."

"Maybe there are records that only a champion would know of," Ristain suggests, tapping a finger against the table. "And that the church would worry over enough to send a weapon to protect."

The concern morphs to panic. "I need to get to Brinsbane." I turn to head for the transporter when Marthia abruptly grabs my arm.

"Have you gone mad?" She huffs, holding tight enough to bruise. "As a paladin, you should be well aware of who Holland is."

"Of course I am, but Olere may be in his path and I have to find him before Holland does."

"Then what?" Ristain asks.

"Bring him to the estate. Now that we know the church is on the move, we can fortify our defenses and keep each other safe. If Holland was sent after Olere, it means he found something that we can use, that may be exactly what we need to bring the church down so we need him now more than ever."

Marthia and Ristain share worried looks. I tug my arm from her grasp, surprised that she releases me so easily.

"We don't have the time to create a foolproof plan, so I have to do what I can and what I can do is find Olere. I'm the best one to do it. He is my mentor." More like a father to me and I can't lose him. Not like this.

"How do you plan to get there?" Marthia asks. "If you take a train or an airship, you'll be on record. The wrong person may send a message to Holland and he'll be on your ass."

"And I doubt you know how to use that transporter," Ristain adds, making me bite my lip. "Best not to take it outside of Lord Seymour's estate either."

"I'm guessing neither of you know how to use the transporter then?" I glance between the two of them, sighing when they both shake their heads. "Great, I can take one of Lore's car."

"His car is recognizable," Marthia argues. She heads to one of the shelving units. Picking through a few, she brings out a book to read, then slams the book shut. "Looks like we have a shipment of weapons heading to a city in Brinsbane. We can smuggle you in with them, though we can't promise any comfort."

"I don't need comfort. I just need to find Olere and bring him home."

Well, Lore seems to be alright, but Olere might be in trouble. A powerful champion might be after him. Will Seren find Olere in time?

100. Ebony Hawinan

The ride down to Brinsbane was cramped, as Marthia and Ristain assured me that it would be. The city we stop in is by no means large, more of a small town surrounded by small farming villages. Once here, I realize there are quite a few hiding places nearby that Olere taught me about. Places to hide if we ever got overwhelmed and needed to heal or rest. Weren't there a few that Olere only shared with me?

I keep to the back streets, wearing plain clothes and a hat to shield my face. When I spot the steeple of a church high over the streets, I ensure to go the opposite way. Never thought a day would come when I react this way to a church. I don't want to risk anyone being here who knows me, especially Holland. I doubt I could take him on. Olere never beat him and I never beat Olere. I have to find him before Holland does and keep us as far away from him as I can, if Holland is truly after Olere. Hopefully I'm overreacting. Though Holland traveling does point to trouble, regardless of whether it has to do with Olere or not.

Over the next three days I search the surrounding area. On the third night, I move further and further away from Brinsbane, investigating the woods or abandoned houses that may work as a temporary shelter. There's no signs of him until the fifth night, after I hopped on a train ride to a few towns over. There's another hiding place near here that I check, an old wine cellar for a house that burned down ages ago. Trees and shrubbery have hidden any sign of the entrance, however, there's dried blood on the leaves. I push aside the shrubs to find the rusted handle of the cellar, also bloody.

I try not to think about what the blood means, that there's a possibility Olere will be down here and there won't be anything I can do for him. Instead, I think of all the reasons he would be fine; because he's Olere, he's tough and knows far more than I ever will. Because I need him to be okay. Because I can't lose anymore family.

Stepping through the door, there's dim light coming from the bottom of the stairs. I can't sense anyone so either a stranger left a fire going or there's a mage hiding down there. Could be Olere. Could be Holland waiting for anyone snooping. Grabbing the dagger I purchased from a shop in Brisbane, I clutch the weapon in my grasp, building power until the blade shimmers gold.

Stepping around the curved steps, I peer into the wine cellar. A man lays at the back, curled up in a long trench coat. A small fire flickers nearby, hovering over nothing and releasing heat but no smoke. Definitely a mage's doing. Containers of water and cans of food litter the corner, opened and used, along with a few bandages from the pile stashed beneath a stone here. That stone has been moved as well, haphazardly thrown aside with bloody handprints marking the sides. This could be a trap so I scan the area for anything suspicious. About the only worrying sign is the blood that has seeped into the man's trench coat and stained the stone floor he lays on.

"Olere?" I call. The man doesn't move. I step closer, carefully, observing the cracked stone walls. When I reach the man, I rest my hand on his shoulder. He's chilled even with the fire.

"Olere?" I whisper, pushing him towards me to examine his features.

Olere's beaten bloody, an eye swelled shut. Bruises litter the entirety of the left side of his face, lip busted and clothes a scarlet mess. I pull the cloth aside, finding Olere haphazardly managed to tend to his wounds. A large gash along his right side seems to have been partially healed, but he either had to run or passed out before he finished. At least he's breathing, albeit burning up from a fever.

Tugging off his bloody clothes, I get to work to do the best that I can. I fear these injuries means Olere did run into Holland, or at the very least a large enough force to put him in this kind of condition. There weren't rumors of a battle in Brinsbane though. A battle between two champions, there would have been talk. Many would have seen the battle, even if Holland got the jump on him. Where were they that no one knows of the battle and that Olere got here in time to hide?

"Seren," Olere whispers, one eye opening. I grab water from my pack to be safe. I haven't been able to check what's here. Offering the drink to Olere, he takes a couple of sips then mumbles, "Holland..."

Maintaining a relatively calm face, I try not to think of a terrifying man coming after us.

"Don't speak. You need rest," I say, setting the water side to finish up healing the gash on Olere's side. He's too exhausted to risk more, but at least the wound is closed. The bleeding has stopped, but it'd be better if I could get some disinfectant and gauze to keep everything clean.

"I got him..." he whispers. "But not enough to stop..."

"Okay, good. Rest. Once you're healed enough to move, we're going to the Seymour estate."

Olere hums and closes his eyes, taking a long breath. After healing him, I dry off his clothes then give my jacket to him as a pillow. I can't risk leaving, so I keep watch and make a quick meal. The food and water are good. Doesn't seem to be old either. I don't think Olere brought the supplies, which means someone else knows about this place. We can't risk staying long. At least I have a sword now, Olere's. He managed to keep it on him. I've never been the best with swords, always preferred a heavier weapon like my axe or a hammer, but I'll need more than a dagger if Holland shows up.

By the time I've finished cooking, Olere has woken up again. Groaning, he attempts sitting up. I hurry over to assist him since he does need to eat and drink. I offer both to him and he practically inhales the water before digging into the food.

"How did you know to look for me?" he asks, sounding as tired as he looks. I reduced the swelling on his eye, but it's still pretty bad. He flinches when my hand passes over the wound, easing more magic into him until he can open the eye.

"We were attacked at the estate," I explain. "A bomb that we believe the monarchy threatened a worker to bring onto the estate. Lore got hurt, but he'll be alright. Since we hadn't heard from you in a while, I worried that something might have happened."

He doesn't know that we're working with the Red Moon yet and I rather not reveal that while he's like this. Even if Olere's helping, he may not be as inclined to do so after hearing of the Red Moon. He'll be easier to convince when he's healed, when he's in the right mind, and we're safe. As safe as we can be, all things considered.

"So I started searching after hearing that Holland had left Trinia and moved south. What were you doing here? Did you find anything concerning the missing persons? Is that why they sent Holland?" I ask.

"Not the missing persons," Olere replies. He keeps me guessing by taking another moment to eat. Having cleared his plate, he sets it aside and gives me a stern stare, a warning of what's to come.

"I grew more suspicious of what the church may be hiding. I told the church that I wanted to visit chapels throughout the kingdom. The people like to see champions and it was an easy lie. At the chapels, I searched records for any sign of the church's transgressions and discovered something peculiar. We have very little information from Ebony Hawinan, our most renowned Prophet who is considered the creator of what the Holy Church is today. Isn't that strange to have lost so much important information?" He asks as if I'm meant to answer, questions continuing to brim in his deep gaze. I give a slow nod, urging him to continue.

"We were told her hometown was Charlizton, near Brinsbane. However, what they have at her temple are replicas, even the chapel is a replica because our records from the Vampire Wars claimed the building and everything within was destroyed. But I found building records, old ones that likely got mixed up from the others that states the church didn't just rebuild the chapel, but also relocated it to a larger town for tourists."

"So Ebony's hometown isn't Charlizton?" I ask.

"No."

"Why would they lie about that?"

"My thoughts exactly. What if there was something in the original chapel that they didn't want anyone to see?"

"Did you find it; the original chapel?" I ask, feeling a sense of hope that we may get exactly what we need, some type of proof to use against the church.

"I searched areas where I knew there were large battles between Ebony and the vampires. I did believe the chapel was destroyed and I was right. In a small town, I found more rubble that seemed like all the others until I discovered a hidden room beneath the cathedral protected by so many spells that it took me almost a week to get through. Inside, I found records that someone tried very hard to hide."

"These records were written by Ebony Hawinan herself. During the Vampire Wars, she did not condemn vampires. She was not the first to speak against them, she merely protected people from those who tried to do harm. However, as the church grew, Ebony saw what the church was becoming. She wrote of having a gathering to remind the people that the Holy Mother's teachings never condemned people, that it was wrong to treat vampires as we had. She gathered a large following, but she was stabbed in the back before she succeeded."

"How?" I ask, thinking of all the stories we were told that I am now realizing are all lies. "We were told that she died of old age. People saw her for many years after the end of the Vampire Wars."

"Because the public was told she took a vow of silence and peace after all that happened during the war. It's why so few saw her the last hundred years of her life. All the church did was find someone who looked vaguely like her to walk around in a veil. Any who sided with her were also killed, their writings destroyed, save for what I found beneath that chapel. With them, I think we can change people's minds. Ebony Hawinan is a beloved figure and if she saw the church's path as wrong, many others will too."

"But people can argue that the documents were faked," I claim.

Olere smirks. "I think she knew people were after her. She made a failsafe. Her words are recorded in a spell."

That sliver of hope returns, burning even brighter. "Where are the records?"

Before Olere can answer, the cellar shakes.

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Hello, hello friends! Another story of mine, Whisper Woods, is now available on amazon as an eBook and paperback. If you're interested, the US links will be on my dashboard with the announcement of this update. If you're outside of the US, go to amazon and search Whisper Woods Twoony to see if it's available in your country!

Wow. We hit 100 chapters. I did not expect this to run as long as it has, but here we are. As a warning, the story is going to end soon. The issues in this story are so deep that I realized they can't all be fixed. It's so deep rooted it'd take decades in this world, so I've done my best to wrap things up, hopefully a satisfying manner. Anyway, Olere has discovered some very important records that could potentially help them, but uh oh, the cellar shook. What's happening? :D

101. Seeing Things

A mighty tremor forms great fissures along the ceiling and walls. Olere and I narrowly made it to the steps prior to the ceiling collapsing. Gusts of dirt fill my lungs and blurs my vision. We hurry to reach safety, barely escaping the crumbling of the stairs. The ground continues shaking. I grasp Olere's arm to prevent him from stumbling. He leans his weight against me, coughing violently. I almost don't hear someone approaching us. Their steps quicken, hidden behind the cloud of dirt. Clutching Olere's sword, I wield the blade in time to defend against Holland's hammer. The metal rings out louder than a train bell.

As the dust settles, Holland's wicked grin comes into view. His dark green eye peers at me, the other a milky white and long since lost its ability to see, and yet I feel as if that is the eye peering through me. Olere did manage to get a few good hits in. Gauze peeks out of the top of Holland's shirt, informing me that there's a chest injury of some kind. He battles with his right hand rather than his left; the left has swelled, bruised and was probably much worse prior to a healing session. He appears to be favoring his right leg as well, but that doesn't mean this will be any easier.

"Seren," Holland says, his voice a guttural growl. "I've heard that you left the church. It's a shame that you've taken one as great as Olere down with you too."

"We've chosen to see the truth, Holland. You would be smart to do the same," I reply.

He scowls, deepening the long scars across his face. "As warped as you have become, I am glad to say that I can at least let you die together."

Holland slams his full weight forward. My heels dig into the dirt. He shoves me aside anyway. I stumble. My sword swings up to catch the handle of the hammer before it smashes Olere's chest. Olere swings the dagger I gave him. Holland retreats, slamming his hammer against the ground. That's

what causes the earth to shake again, trembling as if a meteor hit. The surface shatters. My hand slips off Olere and his off of me. Broken pieces of earth trip me until I stumble through the debris and fog.

"Damn it," I hiss, having lost sight of Olere.

Holland managed to separate us in an instant, completely altering the battlefield with a swing of his hammer. This is exactly why I didn't want to run into him. I couldn't take him on my own, especially not now with Olere's injuries. Though I've yet to see anyone with Holland, there's a chance he hurried ahead and a small militia isn't far behind. My priority is to find Olere as soon as possible and run.

Casting aside the debris, I search through the rubble while keeping my head low. Holland could be anywhere. The moment I call out, he'll be on me, but that's when Olere's anguished cry echoes around me.

I skid around an upturned boulder to find Olere shielding himself from Holland's relentless strikes. When the shield doesn't break, Holland launches himself into the air. I conjure a wave of fire. The flames dance over Holland's shield, glimmering gold. Olere narrowly has time to evade. Holland's hammer strikes the ground so hard that the earth shatters again. The blowback sends Olere tumbling. My heels dig into the ground, keeping me relatively stable.

Holland rushes towards Olere. I throw my full weight at Holland before he gets any further. Our bodies collide in a mess of curses and spells. His fist meets my cheek, cold as ice. The cold slithers up to my eye, blurring my sight. I grab his wrist, burning the skin to burst with blisters. Holland swings his hammer at my head. I release him, swinging my sword to meet the strike. The shrill ring of metal makes me flinch.

Holland doesn't hesitate, beating against the sword over and over. Every hit makes my very bones sing. The pure power reminds me why Holland is number one, why I'm terrified of him, and why I can't let him get his hands on Olere. He doesn't stand a chance like this, but it seems neither do I. The sword shatters. Holland's hammer hits my chest so hard that my ribs crack. The breath is knocked from my lungs. My eyes water. I can't even scream.

He sends me soaring through the air, plummeting to the ground where I heave desperate breaths. I can't breathe for a long moment, then the air rushes in and it feels like too much. I cough and hack and grasp at the ground, desperate to steady myself.

"If you tell me where the documents are, the Prophet may let you live, Olere," Holland says. He looms over Olere, wielding his hammer to strike him down.

"We both know that she won't, that you won't," Olere replies, kneeling and breathless.

Holland smirks. The air has grown stale, as if this side of the world has never felt a breeze. Time moves in slow motion. Holland's knuckles whiten against the handle of his hammer that glows brilliant gold.

"Stop," I groan, remembering feeling this powerless when my mother died. I couldn't do anything then and I can't do anything now. My body won't move no matter how much I plead. "Don't. Leave Olere alone."

My pleas fall upon deaf ears. Olere closes his eyes. Holland brings the hammer down... and I catch the block in my trembling fists. Holland and Olere stare in shock and disbelief. Groaning, Holland tries to rip the hammer from me but my fingers pierce the metal as if it were soft as butter. I don't know how. I couldn't move a second ago. Now there's so much power that it sings like a soft song, massaging my aching muscles and broken bones.

I rip the hammer from Holland's grasp and slam the handle into his gut. He buckles over, heaving. The ground shakes when I bring the hammer down, narrowly missing busting Holland's kneecaps. He curses, continuously stumbling over his own feet. For the briefest moment, fear rests in his eyes prior to the hammer shattering his jaw. He's sent into the air, rolling through the debris.

"Over here!" someone shouts, likely reinforcements.

"Seren." Olere grabs my shoulder, expression still shocked. "We have to go. Come on."

"Right." I drop the hammer. It's too noticeable a weapon to lug around. We break into a run, moving through the trees towards town.

"We'll steal a car," I say, making Olere groan, though that may be due to the pain. "We have to. We'll switch it out a few towns over. We can't risk taking a train."

"Back there," Olere says, stumbling forward. I take hold of the back of his shirt, tugging him onto his feet. "Back there, Seren, your divinity."

"I don't know what happened either. I just felt better."

"Yes, the color of your divinity, it was gold and silver."

I laugh off his words. "We almost died, Olere. You were seeing things."

We've made it to town, but Olere stops us from going further. He holds tight to my arm, speaking sternly, "I was not seeing things. Holland was surprised too, didn't you notice?"

"Because he knew he broke my ribs."

"Yes and they healed because of that divinity. Seren, only the Prophet uses gold and silver."

"It was a trick of the light then," I say, pushing Olere's hand aside, and those ridiculous claims. I don't have the power of a Prophet. I never made it to the level of a champion. "We need to find a car. Now."

Scowling, Olere waits in an alley while I search the street for something inconspicuous. Sucks for the owner of the car, but we need to get out of here as fast as possible. It takes all of a second to steal the vehicle, peeling up next to Olere. He stumbles in, breathing heavily and bleeding. Either Holland hit him while we were separated or he got injured during the eruption. Olere offers me a lopsided smile, claiming that he'll be alright. I

floor it out of town, taking back roads and keeping my eye on the world around us.

"Maybe we shouldn't return to the estate," I say. "Holland may follow us."

"Or he'll go there expecting to see us and when we aren't there, Lore will suffer the consequences," Olere whispers, making me hold painfully tight to the steering wheel. I can't risk going there and I can't risk staying away. We have to accept that, no matter what route we take, there's danger ahead and I rather face that danger by Lore's side.

We grab a different car in another town in hopes to keep Holland off our scent long enough to escape. Almost a day of traveling and two stops to tend to Olere's wounds and we finally make it to Seymour Manor. Olere senses the same thing I do; spells upon spells that prevent us from breaking the treeline, let alone seeing the estate.

"I had no idea the boy Lore fostered was capable of all this," Olere says, limping out of the vehicle.

He rests a hand against an invisible shield that hums with soft blue light. I recognize the spell, a basic shield against an offensive assault. Though behind that shield, Olere and I make out multiple runes warning attacks of their own. I imagine even more are hidden. Cyan couldn't have done this on his own. Lore certainly helped, meaning he revealed what he's capable of to even more people.

Olere nods down the road at the vehicle heading our way, coming from the direction of the mansion. The car stops a few feet away. Draven steps out first, followed by Lore. I breathe a sigh of relief. He's healed, wearing a wrist brace that's likely more a precaution than anything else.

"If you were gone a day longer, I was going to search for you myself," Lore says, approaching the shield.

"Why? Did you miss me that much?" I ask, smiling at his eye roll.

"I was worried." He glances at Olere, hesitating to raise his hand to open the shield. Olere gapes, as do I. Even now, I hadn't expected Lore to show Olere that he could use magic, though I'm glad. In a weird way. Wish it was under better circumstances though.

Lore reaches for me, pulling me in for a kiss that I eagerly lean into. "Though I also missed you," he whispers against my lips, breathing in my presence as I do him.

"I missed you too."

Olere steps through the shield that reappears behind him. He casts Lore a confused stare that has him barely explaining, "Yes, I'm capable of using magic. You're more than welcome to say how impressed you are."

"Let's keep the teasing to a minimum. We have important news to discuss and Olere needs to rest," I say, holding tight to Lore's shoulder. "Holland came after us and we worry he'll come here next."

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Olere and Seren managed to escape Holland, but was Olere seeing things? Seren seems to have used more powerful magic. And Lore has revealed that he can use magic to Olere. Quite a lot going on and things are winding up, oh boy lol

102. Making Their Escape

Olere's shock of discovering Lore's ability is set aside for now. We hurry to the manor to speak with Cyan and Arline, informing everyone of what Olere has found concerning Ebony Hawinan while Cyan assists me with his wounds. Everyone shares different reactions. Arline looks like she wants to throw her hands in the air and declare that she knew this all along. Draven sits silently, arms crossed in deep thought. Cyan ties gauze a little too tightly on Olere's arm, earning a raised brow that Cyan smiles sheepishly at. Lore's eyes darken with anger, managing to spew hatred that heats the room.

"Where are these documents?" Lore asks, glancing at Olere.

"Locked behind a few casts in an abandoned cellar," he answers. "Not far from where I found them. Holland believes I kept them on me."

"We need to retrieve them to give to Ristain. Our plans can't wait much longer to take effect."

"Ristain of the Red Moon?" Olere gapes. "Seren, tell me you aren't working with them."

"We have to," I argue, not missing the concern in Olere's gaze. "They've done their part and assisted in my rescuing of you. If we wish to fight against this, we must accept all the help we can get."

"They can't be trusted."

Arline raises her hand. "Agreed."

She and Olere both look shocked to agree with each other.

"We don't trust them to have our backs. We will take care of ourselves," Lore interjects. "The Red Moon has the same goal as us, so we're working

together and that's something you have to accept. Especially now. There is no room to be picky."

I throw Lore a look that has him giving a weak shrug. He's right, but sometimes he's too blunt. Grasping Olere's shoulder, I give it a reassuring squeeze that does little to ease his tension. He sighs and says, "Fine, but I will go with them to retrieve the documents. I don't trust them not to tamper with anything."

"You can't. We need to retrieve them now and I just got you to safety," I argue, remembering how Holland stood over Olere with every intention to kill him. The thought makes me short of breath. I've lost enough people in my life. I don't know how I'd handle all of this on top of losing Olere.

"Seren's right. You're too injured," Lore says. "And we cannot afford to wait. The Holy Church has realized that we're more of a threat than previously predicted. They are obviously prepared to rush forward with our demise."

"I'll go." Cyan stands, earning an immediate wide-eyed stare from Draven. He looks ready to argue, but Cyan's swift to speak, "Olere can inform me how to break the protective spells. Seren and I are the only others who can break them easily enough and he should stay here in case anyone from the church arrives."

"Alright. Cyan will go to Ristain to retrieve the documents. The rest of us will remain here in case anyone arrives. Our top priority now is keeping the children safe." Lore rises, ignoring Olere's confused stares and Draven's concerned frown. Cyan gives him a reassuring smile that I doubt eases his concerns, but Cyan is the best option. He's strong. He can take care of himself.

Olere looks at me. "Is anyone going to explain how the dhampir can use magic and how Cyan will find the Red Moon when we're likely under heavy watch?"

The next few minutes are spent explaining, while excluding details concerning Lore's upbringing, resulting in Olere's eyes widening to comical

proportions. I'm surprised the spheres don't pop out of his head. Arline and Draven have sauntered off. Lore runs his hand gently over my shoulder, then takes his leave, thus leaving Olere and I alone in the living area. Lore mustn't have called anyone to work on the manor. Cyan and him seem to have used some basic magic to stabilize the structure. Can't say I blame him. There's no telling if someone were sent to the house with ill intentions.

"I don't know about this," Olere says afterwards. When he takes a long breath, I'm relieved that he sounds alright. No longer wheezing or coughing, resting comfortably on the couch looking much better than earlier.

"I understand that this is a lot to take in. I wasn't sure how to feel about most of it initially either," I explain. "But we can't remain idle when we now know what the Holy Church has been doing. We need to trust in each other."

"I trust in you," he says, refraining from admitting that he doesn't trust the others. I don't blame him for that. They don't know each other well enough, though I hope that will change. I hope we get out of this together.

"Are we not going to continue our discussion from earlier?" Olere asks. "Your battle against Holland."

"There's nothing to discuss," I argue. "Even if you saw what you said you did, it was a fluke. I don't have that kind of power."

"The Prophet didn't always have it either. Your divinity grows with you."

I don't know what to say, and I don't have the time to think of anything. A flash of blue light garners our attention. Olere and I glance at the windows. The shield shimmers, signaling that there's someone touching it. Olere tries to rise. I push him back onto the couch, insisting he remain in place. Frowning, he gives a reluctant nod. I head for the foyer, finding Lore with a frown on his face.

"They're already here," he says, opening the front door.

"How many?" I ask, following him to the car.

"Not sure, but there's certainly a champion."

"Holland, most likely." And unfortunately. He's hard enough on his own. If they're here, there's likely reinforcements, making a battle far worse.

"Are we truly going to stay here?" I ask as we step into the car. Lore grips the wheel so tightly I fear he'll break it. I rest my hand on his tense shoulder. "I know you wish for the children to stay here where they're most comfortable, but we may not be able to keep the church and the monarchy at bay."

"I know," he whispers, then steps on the gas to head towards the disturbance.

Holland comes into view, standing tall in front of at least twenty holy knights, thirty of the monarchy's soldiers, and ten paladins. They sent a small army that we certainly can't stand against on our own. Holland appears relatively healed too. His jaw's terribly bruised, but the bones are likely taken care of.

Stepping out of the car, Lore and I approach the barrier that will shatter in minutes when this kind of force attacks. They haven't destroyed it yet though and that somehow worries me more.

"Good afternoon," Holland says with a polite, but also somehow sardonic nod of his head. "We've come to arrest the Lord of Seymour Manor for the corruption of a church official, forcing him to attack his own kind, as well as conspiring with the Red Moon."

"I left of my own accord, Holland," I argue. "The Holy Church is well aware of that."

But the church wants to have a believable excuse to give the people for Lore's arrest. As much power as they have, they maintain that power by ensuring that their actions have sound reasoning to the public. Arresting Lore, a relatively beloved and respected lord, must have a good reason and they've conjured one by using me, though I am unsure where they got proof

of our involvement with the Red Moon. That may be a lie they're adding, knowing that it'll frighten the public more easily.

"I'm sure Lord Seymour wants you to say that, Seren, but fear not, we'll have you out of his grasp in no time," Holland says while retrieving two rolls of parchment from his robes. "By royal and religious decree, Lord Seymour is under arrest. We will give you five minutes to decide whether you will come peacefully or not. I really rather not risk a battle around the children or for them to see their father dragged away in chains."

My glare intensifies. I look to Lore, expecting him to speak. He says nothing, pivoting on his heel without a word. I swiftly follow him, hurrying to the car where Lore reminds me how much of a hectic driver he is. We skid to a halt in front of the mansion after tearing apart the road from the sheer speed at which he drove.

"Grab whatever you can from the children's rooms; clothes, blankets, toys, whatever may comfort them," Lore orders. "I will retrieve the children and staff."

"What are we going to do?" I ask, dashing inside.

"Take the transporter to the Red Moon hideout. There are too many to fight and I will not risk the children's lives. We will tear those bastards apart another day." With that, he runs towards the school house and I do as I'm told, grabbing a few staff along the way to assist me.

Moments later, everyone arrives in Lore's room. The children's expressions of horror are not missed. Oliver whimpers on Arline's shoulder. The twins grasp each other's hands so tightly that they shake. Darika pats Nalo's back as he heaves anxious breaths. They all shriek when the shield shimmers brightly, telling all of us that Holland is on the attack. Lore rests a hand on Reegan's trembling shoulder while activating the transporter. Hyun Woo clings to my waist. I run my fingers through his hair, hoping to relieve him. Everyone steps through the red mist, unsure if the manor will remain standing by the time we return. If we ever return.

Ristain and Cyan are shocked to see us. Then Ristain notices Arline. He offers her a smile that she doesn't return. She holds Oliver tightly, her other hand rests on Isabella's trembling shoulder. Her gaze shifts about the room, pure rage within them. A rage that comes tumbling out when she hisses, "You never should have done any of this."

Lore looks at her, rolling his shoulders when she growls, "The kids are terrified and will never forget this."

Then she guides those kids out of the room, slapping Ristain's hand away when he barely attempts to grab her arm. Lore gets a tight hug from Hyun Woo and Reegan before they leave. The tension doesn't vanish with them. It lingers over all of us, heavy and suffocating. There's a darkness to Lore's eyes that reminds me of the cellar, of the night I killed Aja. I know what he has done, what he's capable of doing, and how all that rage is now pointed solely at the church.

"Well, Cyan has informed me about the documents." Ristain nods at Olere, bringing everyone's attention to him. "Those will be more helpful than any of us can truly imagine. I've contacted a handful of others to go with us, though if the church has moved this quickly I think we should take a small force of our own."

"Certainly, and use this." Lore sets the transporter on the table. "We can't afford anyone getting caught and we certainly aren't going anywhere now."

Ristain grasps the transporter, observing it as he says, "I'll send word to start the plans once we've had a thorough look at the documents. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner those kids can return home where they belong."

And hopefully forget some of this ordeal.

"Draven, go with Cyan and Ristain," Lore orders. Draven gives a slow nod before joining Cyan and Ristain at the table. I walk towards Lore, grasping his arm. He jumps as if he forgot I was here.

"The children will be okay, Lore. We'll take care of them," I say, hoping to reassure him, to get that look out of his eyes. It frightens me, even if I know we need that kind of anger right now.

Sighing, Lore steps closer to rest an arm around my waist. Pulling him into my embrace, I hold him tight because I know he needs it. So do I.

"Arline's right. They won't forget how terrified they were, how I didn't take care of them as I said I would," he growls.

"Yes you have and I'd like to think, one day, they'll be proud of their father for what he's done."

"You *hope* they'll be proud."

I bite my lip and hold him a little tighter.

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Geesh, our boys can't catch a break. The Holy Church and monarchy aren't playing. They've chased Lore and Seren out of their home. The children are scared. Their plans have been pushed up. Will the children be able to deal with this trauma? Will they all ever return to Seymour Manor and live happily?

103. Plans in the Works

Cyan POV

We travel through the shadows of the streets, glancing down alleys and across roadways for any who may recognize us. A poster catches my attention, a crudely drawn rendition of me with crooked eyes. I rip the paper from the wall, glaring at it and the rendition of Draven that is far more flattering. Though no drawing could ever do him true justice.

"These sickening hemorrhoids. Take a look at this," I say, offering Draven the poster. He raises a curious brow barely discernible beneath his dark hood. "They made me look a fool. I bet I don't even need this hat. No one would recognize me from this. Whoever drew this should be fired."

Draven holds the poster up, admiring the both of us. I try not to flush under the attention, but I've been failing at that ever since we made our relationship official. And here I thought that'd lessen my heart skips, alas they've been made worse. If I must seek medical attention, Draven will be charged for it.

"I certainly see the resemblance," he says, smirking at my glare. He crumbles the paper and mumbles under his breath, "Though it's almost cruel to expect anyone to capture your true beauty."

My throat runs dry at his stupidly suave words that work more than I'd care to admit.

Draven offers me a swift glance then clears his throat, "Come along, they'll be starting soon."

"Right." I follow Draven, smiling when he ghosts his fingers over my palm. He never takes hold of my hand, just offers a soft touch that tells me he wants to. Slipping my fingers between his, our hands clasp and we continue our journey to the townsquare where Ristain informed us a few deserters of the Holy Church, like Seren and myself, will speak.

Almost a month has passed since we fled Seymour Manor. The children have been adjusting in their own ways. Arline keeps an even more watchful eye on them. Lore is actually grateful that the Holy Church searches so heavily for him and Seren. It gives them an excuse to lay low, to stay with the children and tend to them while Draven and I, along with others of the Red Moon, keep track of how our plan is fairing. While our posters have been cast about the cities, they pale in comparison to Lore, Seren, and even Olere. I'm surprised the Holy Church hasn't created a spell to show images of the most wanted criminals of the kingdom in the sky. Honestly, I'm a little insulted not to be higher on their watchlist. I'll have to cause more trouble so I can take the number one spot.

"What are you smirking at?" Draven inquires skeptically.

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"Stop thinking it. You're making me nervous."

That makes me laugh. Draven shows a soft smile that disappears as quickly as it arrived. We made it to the townsquare where a crowd of civilians had formed. They surround a makeshift platform. Four church survivors stand atop the platform. Draven and I gaze about the crowd, spotting six other members of the Red Moon. We're here to ensure nothing happens to those brave enough to speak out.

The survivors are already speaking, telling stories similar to my own. They lost their family to vampires or showed promise in the magical arts. The church took them away, beat us, trained us to be murderers. The crowd gasps when two of the survivors reveal the scars littering their backs. I roll my shoulders, recalling the countless times a rod beat against my skin until it bled. Draven rubs his thumb against the back of my hand, easing the tension with a simple gesture.

"What is this rubbish?" A man huffs beside us. "The Holy Church toughens kids up to fight those damned vamps. They wouldn't survive otherwise. They're causing a stir over nothin'!"

"That's no excuse to beat children," a woman argues.

"It ain't beating. It's strength buildin'!" He grabs an apple from the bag he's carrying to launch at the stage. "Get out of here, heretics!"

Draven holds my hand tighter, preventing me from punting that ass-licking snotrag to the next country. Maybe Draven's right in this scenario because, surprisingly, the crowd doesn't appear to agree with him. He earns a couple confused stares and even more glares. An uneasiness settles over the crowd when one of the speakers reveals a truth that has been spreading through the kingdom like wildfire, "The Holy Church is not what you think it is. They take frightened children and put weapons in their hands to lay down their lives fighting what the church deems to be evil. If you dare to say no, if you dare to say this is not the life you wish to live, they don't just cast you out; they send the monarchy after you to sell as bloodbags to Vexsis!"

That makes the crowd fall into an uproar; mixtures of disbelief, anger, and confusion. Whispers pass from one ear to the next, questioning whether to believe or if this is a hoax. Some shout it, like the man who threw the apple, shaking their fists in protest or storming away hollering.

"Vampiric lies!" some scream. "Rotten tales conjured by the Red Moon even!"

"Give it some thought," another speaker says in a softer voice. "How many do you know who left the church? How often do any admit to leaving? It isn't because many haven't left or that we don't wish to speak on it. It's because we're taken if we dare to stand against the church."

"I've heard others have been speaking of this in towns over," a boy whispers to his friend.

"Just because a few are speaking of it doesn't make it true. This could be the work of the Red Moon, telling a bunch of lies to skew our faith," his friend replies while toiling with a golden necklace of the Holy Mothers. Others do the same, clutching their objects of faith or gazing towards steeples on the horizon.

"Are we considering this going well or not?" I ask Draven, glancing towards a street where I can make out a priestess hurrying towards

townsquare. Someone is guiding her, likely having heard the speakers and immediately went to retrieve a priestess to "diffuse" the situation.

"Better than expected, I believe," Draven replies, noticing the priestess too. "At least they're listening. Soon they'll gossip and those who have always had suspicions will speak up more and more."

"Let's hope so."

The priestess moves through the crowd, holding up a hand as she speaks, "Let's calm down everyone!"

Smiling, she ascends the platform and doesn't give the speakers a passing glance. Instead, she focuses on the crowd, gently waving her hands to keep their attention on her. "Take a breath everyone. These baseless claims need not cause concern. They'll clearly lies being fed to you as a ploy to deter your faith, either by the vampires of Vexsis or the Red Moon. We mustn't let them get their way so easily."

"It's time to leave," Draven declares. He nods towards another street where a handful of holy knights march towards the square.

Raising my hand, I give a nonchalant wave, a signal to the others to get moving. The speakers on the platform hop down and push through the crowd to meet their keepers. Draven and I scurry towards a nearby alley, narrowly catching the holy knight's arrivals. More and more have been dispersed from Trinia to attend to the cities after the church realized there was an organized plot against them. Those foggy minded toads are the true buffoons if they believe they'll stop us now. The mission will continue until Trinia falls, even if we fall with it.

"Hey, you two, stop!" Someone calls. Draven glances over his shoulder briefly, then he tugs me towards another street. I barely caught a glimpse of who called out to us; a holy knight. One that picks up their pace to catch up.

I trip over my feet, cursing when my back meets the cold brick exterior of a store. "What are you--"

Suddenly, Draven leans over me, clutching the fabric of my jacket to bundle around my neck that he gently cradles. Though his skin doesn't touch mine, that doesn't deter the heat radiating off him, and me. My eyes widen, breath hitches when he leans forward like he's actually going to kiss me. I grasp the end of his shirt with trembling fingers, a thousand questions on my tongue that I never ask. Although I could because he doesn't actually kiss me. We've gotten to holding hands without me scratching, but anything more remains out of the question. Even if I desperately want more.

Draven lingers here, hovering over me, creating an inferno between us that even my explosive hobbies cannot rival. I can't see past him like this, but I hear someone speaking again, "What are you doing? Those lying heretics went this way."

"Right, I just thought... nevermind," the same holy knight from earlier says, then they disappear.

Draven retreats, as much as I let him anyway. My hands haven't released him yet. I want to stay like this a little longer, pretend that we can do more.

"We should hurry back before that knight realizes he did recognize us," Draven says. His hands drop to his side. "Sorry. Was that too much?"

"Huh?"

"I thought surprising him might work."

"Right, yeah, no, that was... that was a good plan." I finally relinquished my death grip on his shirt. Stepping around him, I head towards the street, squeaking when Draven tugs on the hood of my jacket.

"It's this way," he says, smirking.

Stomping past him, I grunt, "Shut up."

"I said nothing worthy of such a request."

"I can hear you thinking something worthy of that request."

"I had no idea you could read minds."

"One must keep a few secrets to themselves to add an air of mystery."

Humming, Draven mimics his actions earlier; ghosting the tip of his fingers over my hand. When I take firm hold, he steps ahead of me to guide us the remainder of the way to the car we borrowed from the Red Moon. The drive back takes over an hour. During that time, I run my fingers over Draven's palm, his wrist, and up his arm until he rolls his shoulders.

"Ticklish?" I ask, amused.

"No."

I do repeat the action. He shivers.

"A little," he admits, so I do it again and he gently taps my thigh in warning. Though he holds my hand afterwards and I wonder if it's okay to feel this giddy over holding someone's hand.

By the time we return, the speakers from the event are already there. Lore lent the Red Moon his transporter to ensure the speaker's safety. The quicker they escape the better.

"Welcome back," Lore says from the meeting room. Seren, Olere, Ristain, and a few other members are there discussing how everything went.

"We've yet to have any severe interference," Marthia explains. "We've had dozens of events, each has received more attention than the last. A few papers have written about them, which the church has only started preventing in the last week."

"Word is spreading," Seren adds, smiling at me when I step beside him. "More and more are daring to even hint at the claims being true. They're realizing we're serious and want to stop the momentum before it gets too far ahead of them."

"Meaning they will likely begin to severely interfere," Marthia continues. "I won't be surprised if there's an attack next."

"Most likely, though that may work in our favor if they dare to attack in public," Olere adds. He didn't speak to the Red Moon much for the first week or so, often spending his time with Seren. Lore didn't like that at all, but Olere has come around and he has taught me a few cool moves. He's alright in my book!

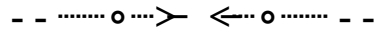
"We're seeing promising signs, however, the people will never truly abandon the church without good reason," Olere adds. "Is it not time to reveal the documents now? Before a potential attack because a violent response may actually help the citizens believe the documents to be true."

Nodding, Lore speaks up, "Agreed, though the issue lies in how to do so. Once we reveal the documents, we'll truly have the church's undivided attention. We have to assume we may not get another chance to speak up as we have been so we must ensure to get this message out to as many as we can in one moment."

"The capital," Ristain claims, earning surprised looks from almost everyone. He leans his weight against the table, nodding. "It's a risk, but our best move. Everything leads to the capital so once gossip as severe as this starts there, it will spread faster than ever to the surrounding areas."

"How will we make it out of that alive?" I inquire, glancing at the transporter on the table. "We have one transporter. The likelihood of us getting separated during the chaos of literal fire raining on us from some very pissed off champions, and likely the Prophet herself, is high."

"We distract them," Seren answers. Lore grasps his hand under the table so tightly that his knuckles redden. Seren looks at Ristain and says, "I'll distract them."



A month has passed and their plans are in action. Draven and Cyan had some sweet moments. They have also done some reconnaissance. Things seem to be going well, for now. Will they continue this way? Is it a good idea to go to the capital? What are Seren's plans?

As a warning, Ep. 106 will be the end of this series. You can start thinking up questions for the Q&A if you'd like, but obviously there's a bit left so I'd suggest leaving them in the comments section later!

104. The Beginning of the End

Seren POV

I didn't think I'd be back in Trinia so soon, unless it was in handcuffs or a coffin.

Lore stands beside me in the darkened alley, dressed in plain clothes. I overheard him grumbling about the lackluster attire. Even when our lives are on the line, he wants to dress to impress. Can't say I understand because I find him impressive no matter what he wears. Maybe I should say that to ease the tension, my own to be perfectly fair. I feel the stiffness in my limbs. My eyes shift, incapable of focusing.

"Seren," Lore calls.

"Hmm?"

He rests a hand on the small of my back. There isn't so much as a tremble, reminding me that committing a crime is something Lore is accustomed to.

"Take a breath. This will work," he says.

"I thought this day would be easier," I whisper. He rests his head against my temple and says no more.

Neither of us expected to be here, risking our lives together. I do think I'd be less nervous if Lore weren't here, if there wasn't a possibility that I'll witness his demise or his mine. We both have always known our deaths are a possibility. They were meant to be a possibility we never saw in person.

"How are things going on your end, Ristain?" I ask through the walkie talkie. My palms have started to sweat as I've watched the clock on a nearby belltower.

The walkie talkie buzzes, then Ristain replies, "Almost ready."

Two words make my breath shake. Lore notices. He grasps my waist, bringing me in to rest his forehead against mine. I don't know how I ignored this need to be near him for so long. Now I can't imagine resisting this urge to have his hand in mine, to press our lips together in a soft kiss. Then Lore kisses me passionately until I have to push away for a breath.

"In case this plan goes awry," he says, making me shake my head. He doesn't allow me to speak, pressing a finger against my lips to silence me. "There is a chance that it will, so I... there's something you must hear."

"Everyone is in position," Ristain says over the walkie talkie.

I reach for it only for Lore to grab my wrist. He brings my hand to his lips where he whispers, "Please listen."

"Tell me later."

Lore's furrowed brow and pained scowl makes my heart skip. I think I know what he wants to say, the same thing I want to say, but I don't want it to be now. Not like this.

"Tell me after," I insist, sounding desperate.

"After."

Before Ristain becomes concerned, I retreat from Lore to speak into the walkie talkie, "Alright. Lore and I will be on radio silence now. We're heading for Trinia."

We stash the device behind a dumpster. I double check that Lore has Cyan's freakish tracking device undetectable by magic. How? Well, he got his hands on a few items from Vexsis that he did not share until now. Sometimes that boy worries me. Once we're prepared, we head towards Trinia hand in hand. There's a chance they'll fire at us on sight, though we're hopeful that the Prophet will want to speak. That she's curious about where Ebony's documents are, what we plan to do with them, and if she can get any truths out of us. The church is cocky, understandably so. They've gotten

away with more than we'll ever know for centuries. Why would they fear us? And that's what we're banking on.

Holy knights guard the gates. The moment one notices me, she alerts the others. Shouts grow louder as dozens of knights march atop the walls. Shimmering white or silver light overtake their fists, each prepared to strike. Lore and I raise our hands in surrender, though it doesn't deter their concerned expressions.

"We're not here to cause any trouble," I say around a smile. "We'd like to speak with the Prophet, if she'd have us."

"Why would she ever agree to speak with you, heretic?!" Someone bellows, but another orders everyone to keep their eyes on us while they leave.

Moments later, the gates open. A dozen paladins walk out along with another champion, Rosemary. A paladin searches the both of us, finding no weapons. Rosemary pulls out two pairs of cuffs, unaware that Lore's restraints need to be enchanted like mine. After we're cuffed, she leads us through the gates. Everyone stares and whispers, speaking of my betrayal and fearful of Lore's capabilities to "convert" people. He snaps his teeth at a few priests, who jump or shriek and bolt in another direction. Leave it to Lore to have fun in this scenario.

We're guided to the cathedral, around the back rooms to a high tower where the Prophet's personal office resides. Rosemary pushes open a heavy stone door, revealing a circular room made almost entirely of shelves. Books cover the walls from floor to ceiling and lights hover overhead, humming softly. The Prophet sits at a desk illuminated by the four large windows behind her, paneled in beautiful colors depicting the Holy Mothers.

"Sit them here," she orders, gesturing at the two chairs in front of her desk.

Rosemary and the paladin don't seat us. They throw us. I grunt when I hit the chair, then squirm to get more comfortable. Lore blows strands of hair out of his face though remains slumped. Loraleigh doesn't appreciate it, based on the slight twitch of her fingers.

"Leave us," the Prophet orders. Rosemary hesitates, her glare shifting to Lore, then she bows and makes her exit.

The first part of our plan is in effect. By now, word is spreading that we've arrived at Trinia. As strong as the Prophet is, we were always taught to defend her with our lives. Those sent out to search the capital are likely heading back to the church, intent on defending her if need be. And those who remain will be distracted by the thought of us potentially causing her harm. Ristain and the others will have more room, more time to speak. If we can buy them a minute, that's enough.

"Seren, it's a pity we're meeting again like this," Loraleigh says, then looks at Lore. "Lord Seymour, you're starting to make a habit of stealing my members."

"Is it stealing if you stole them first?" Lore argues.

"We gave them homes. We gave you a home, Seren, after those vampires butchered your family and nearly did the same to you. What have we done to garner this hostility?"

"Stop playing pretend," I hiss, glaring at her calm expression. "You know damn well what. You know that we should have been taken care of as children, treated as children rather than soldiers for a war we never truly understood. You tortured us for your own personal gain."

"We never claimed that training would be easy," she says, steepling her hands atop the desk. "To battle monsters, we must take the paths less traveled. Not everyone is capable of it."

"Or they're smart enough to see through the lies and you have to be rid of them before they convince others," Lore interjects, then offers me a sly smirk. "No offense."

I roll my eyes.

"What excuses do you have for what you've been doing to those that you claim are not capable of handling that path?" Lore inquires, sitting up fully

to rest one leg elegantly over the other. Unlike me, he appears unphased. I wish I had that confidence, though now I understand why he's such a good actor and often wish that he wasn't.

"Why pay the monarchy to capture those who defy the church and sell them off to Vexsis if not to protect your own skin?" he finishes, smug.

Loraleigh sighs, her gaze almost bored when she asks, "Neither of you are very bright, are you?" Rising, she steps around the desk to stand in front of us, leaning back with her hands grasping the edge. "How do you think we've had this so-called peace for so long? Hmm? Because sacrifices had to be made. This decision was made centuries ago by those who suffered through the war. If those sacrifices stop, what happens?" She leans forward, speaking to me. "What do you suppose will happen if, by some miracle, you get what you want?"

"I imagine a lot of kids will live the lives they deserve," I answer, making her scoff.

"Those kids will die of hunger, starvation, and war," she claims. Turning, she points at the red dot on the horizon; the gateway. "Valyork will lose the blood that vampires have come to crave. Our kingdom will lose a very wealthy benefactor, then those starving vampires will attack and we'll have the next Vampire War. One that will be far worse after vampires have had centuries to prepare. All the work you did will be for nothing as the fear of vampires overtakes the kingdom as it did then."

"I think for someone of faith, you actually have very little of it."

She finally frowns and takes a step towards me when there's commotion outside. A scuffling sound followed by the door bursting open. Rosemary and a paladin enter, the former of the two holding the most necessary piece of our plan; a listening device that Cyan successfully managed to place outside the door by using Lore's transporter. The tracker let him know when we stopped, that we were likely in the Prophet's office. Kind of a hit or miss plan, but it worked.

"Prophet, I came to inform you of another gathering of deserters when I discovered this above the door." Rosemary hurries towards Loraleigh, offering the blinking device. "It was not there earlier when we entered."

Loraleigh's facade shatters. Anger rages in her eyes that shift to the window when loud shouts echo from the gates. She crushes the wiretap in her palm and that's when she attacks.

I cast a shield to protect us from a wintery assault. Ice encases the office, drowning the room in white. Rosemary moves for Lore. She raises her sword singing with golden light. Lore creates a blade of his own, a dull blue in color. When their blades meet, her eyes widen. Even Loraleigh hesitates, both baffled by Lore's use of magic. He is smug, of course. But there's no time to focus on their new discovery, Loraleigh blocks the streak of lightning I send at her. She jumps backwards through the shattered window behind her desk. I follow. We descend to the chaotic ground below. The recording had been heard by the city. Riots must be happening in the streets. Smoke rises and people shout at the gates. Many knights and paladins have gone there, leaving Loraleigh and I to battle on the field below.

The Prophet is nothing like Holland. She doesn't use brute strength. She moves like water, every movement as perfect as the last. Loraleigh casts aside fireballs and blocks electric shocks with a mere wave of her hand. My attacks are sent back at me, each amplified by her power. A fireball once the size of my fist morphs into a boulder that sets the brush behind me aflame. Above, a blast makes the cathedral tremble. I catch a glimpse of Lore's pale blue magic. He's still alive.

"That dhampir is always full of surprises," she growls. "Though I admit he has outdone himself, having stolen a paladin and defiling the Holy Mother's divinity."

"It isn't defiling. He's as deserving to use magic as I am, and far more deserving than you."

"Magic," she hisses. Raising a single hand, she vanishes only to reappear beside me. Her dagger pierces my side. Shouting, I swing my arm at her, but she disappears.

Holy knights round the corner of the cathedral. As predicted, once they knew the Prophet was under attack they'd come running. Nearly a dozen of them surge towards me, swords and spears crackling with elemental spells. I run to keep their attention on chasing me while Ristain and the others do their stuff. Of course, the holy knights aren't the only ones paying attention to me.

Loraleigh appears at the end of the sidewalk, a single hand outstretched and pulsating with vibrant golden and silver light. I drop to my stomach, narrowly dodging a beam of light that dissipates. She was able to shoot a spell and command it to stop before it hurt the wrong person. Yeah, we might have been crazy to take her on.

Gust of winds lift me from the ground. Loraleigh twirls her hands, thus spinning me with them. I reach towards the earth, calling forth roots that grasp onto my limbs. They prevent Loraleigh from smashing me against the cathedral walls. Though forcing the roots to toss me aside like a rag doll doesn't feel too good either. Digging my fingers into the dirt, I force a wave of mud and grass towards Loraleigh. She breaks the dirt apart with a snap of her fingers, turning it into fine dust that coats everything in brown.

"You've had your fun and threw your tantrum, Seren. Let's end this so I may attend to the trouble you have caused," she says, stepping closer. The holy knights surround me, forming a circle with their weapons readied.

A deep fissure forms in the cathedral wall behind Loraleigh. She doesn't notice. The holy knights shout. Another blast rings from above, destroying the steeple. Pieces of the church rain around us. I flinch upon hearing a few knights scream, too slow to react. The fall casts debris into the air, fogging the area. I know that was Lore. I just don't know if he did that on purpose.

Loraleigh managed to shield herself. The dust scatters when she dissolves her protection. I charge forward, using the momentary confusion to get close. She retreats, fading from my vision as she uses that disappearance act. This time I'm ready though. I grab her wrist and send my fist into her gut. She lurches forward, gasping. Then curses when my elbow cracks against her nose. Blood splatters at our feet. Her dagger reappears. She aims for my heart. I catch the blade between my hands, snapping it off the hilt.

The gusts of wind return, attempting to carry me off my feet. I bury my feet into the dirt, literally. The earth circles my feet, locking me in place. Loraleigh hisses and reaches for my face with hands of flames. I grab them, pressing my full power against her. She does the same. Golden and silver magic pulsates around us. The magic is so strong that the holy knights can't move forward. Any attack is diverted by the powerful shield around us. I don't understand how or what it really is, but it's working and that's all that matters.

"I see you were holding a few tricks up your sleeve too," she growls, somehow forcing her magic into my very veins. I feel the power, like slithering hot iron burning me from within, moving closer and closer to my heart. "But I've had this power for years, far longer than you. I know how to wield it. I understand what I'm truly capable of."

"I at least know that I can do whatever you can," I growl, meeting her firm gaze.

She presses forward, managing to rip her feet free from the mud. My own legs ache, being pushed back from her sheer force. I realize now that even Holland has nothing on her. If I let up for even a moment, she'll crush me like a bug.

Focusing all my energy on the power emanating from our connection, I try to push that magic towards her as well. It isn't until she releases a soft hiss that I realize it's working. Her veins are visible beneath her skin, a strange gray in color like my own. The power between us grows stronger, whipping the air so violently that it tears at the earth. Then there's so much power that it releases in a concussive blast. I'm sent hurtling through the air. My limbs are so heavy that all I can do is fall, waiting to hit the hard ground. I'm met by arms narrowly catching me instead, tugging me towards a warm chest.

"Lore?" I cough, trying to move my hands. They won't listen. Through my blurred vision, I make out the top of Trinia's cathedral. The church has been set ablaze, the entire back of the cathedral slowly crumbles into a dust cloud.

"It's time for us to leave," Lore says, holding me tighter. "Can you run?"

"I think so. My hands..." I look down at them, scared to find my hands cracked like old clay up to my elbows. I can't feel them. They refuse to move.

Lore can't hide his frightened expression. Using the firm hold on my arm, we hurry towards the exit. The chaos and debris help shield us, though we're spotted twice. Lore handles the assailants, always surprising them by using magic. Since they don't expect the attack, they drop in an instant. Many holy knights and priests are here, but they're so busy pushing back the shouting crowd that they don't notice two hooded figures slipping into said crowd.

I take a chance to look back at the place I once called home. Now, it burns.

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Wowza, this episode was hard. Magic battles are hard. Why do I do this to myself? But at least Lore and Seren have survived. What about Seren's hands though? And Trinia is in flames. Citizens are rioting. Is this a sign that their plan is actually working? Will this momentum continue? =O

105. We'll Be Ready

Cyan POV

"Did you plant the device?" Ristain asks after I reappear at his side near townsquare. I used Lore's transporter to hop into Trinia. I barely managed to put the listening device by the Prophet's door without being caught. A frightening and abnormally large paladin stood by the door. Would have been an unpleasant experience, had I been caught.

"We're ready to go and I do expect a lot of thanks after this. You do realize none of this would have worked if I weren't around right?" I grin at Draven, who shakes his head. "Stealing from Vexsis turned out better than expected, and this is why I support thievery."

"That isn't what you should have learned from this experience," Draven says and is ignored.

I managed to create a frequency that would overtake all the radios or anything similar to play Ebony's recordings. Townsquare has a few speakers too that are used for large events. It should cover a lot of ground. Other than that, survivors also joined us today. They're scattered throughout the city with Red Moon members protecting them. I hand over Lore's transporter to Ristain. He's going to use it to get the speakers out first at designated locations.

Draven and I stand hand in hand as we listen to Ebony's voice carry over the city. She sounds a lot younger than I expected, though I know she was a few centuries old by this point. There's power to her voice though, something that keeps everyone in place. The city grows silent as all stand about listening to Ebony announce who she is and how she believes the Holy Church is going in the wrong direction. All that she predicts of the future is true; how she believed they would use the fear of vampires to make themselves practically a governing authority, how she feared people

would be made into soldiers rather than healed from horrible events. It's crazy, and I think it's working because, soon, the city is in an uproar.

First there's minor whispering. Then people choose to go home or head to the nearest church to ask questions. Then Trinia burns. Ash and smoke stain the sky, blocking out the sun. Blazing lights cast the world in orange light. Knights of both the monarchy and the church rush to force the people back inside. The citizens do not take kindly to that, asking again and again if what they heard was true. When they're met by violent orders to get back inside, that seems to be answer enough.

All throughout the city, the Prophet's words continue playing on repeat. Those in the squares, dozens around the city, spoke of their past at the church and the people heard. Now they scream at the knights, demanding answers. Some headed for the church, though now they run in all directions to avoid the flames. We're running too. Draven and I scoped out a few good areas to get cars. The Red Moon had a few vehicles that were used for the speakers. There weren't enough for everyone to have their own. We agreed that we wouldn't risk waiting too long to meet up. It may get us caught.

Draven and I cut through the streets. When Draven and I round the next corner, we run straight into a group of knights. They were definitely given posters of us because they don't hesitate to attack. Three have guns and the other two carry magic infused weapons. Bullets fly past us. One hits Draven in the shoulder. My stomach sinks even after I see the skin heal over like nothing.

I cast a shield around us. Draven searches the area. We're the only ones here, so I'm not surprised when he holds out his hand. I haven't seen him use his trait in a while. It's always fascinating. A mist almost invisible to the naked eye drafts off his hand to cascade at our feet. The knights stumble back, confused, but the mist moves swiftly. It circles all of them. Draven and I retreat until we're hidden behind another wall. Then Draven closes his hand. I hear the soldiers mumbling to themselves, confused on what they're doing and why.

"You freak me out," I whisper, earning an exaggerated eye roll.

The streets have become a mix between deathly silent or outrageously loud. Families have gone to their homes to peek through the curtains to inspect the damage. Some run through the streets, taking advantage of the chaos to break into stores. Others seek out cathedrals to search for answers. Draven and I pass one where there appears to be two sides; those who are so desperate to believe the church that they ignore what they heard and those who become enraged at the priests blundering through answers.

"I didn't expect it to get so bad," I say, unsure of what to do when a man grabs a priest by the collar to violently shake. Others come to the priest's aid, but others aid the man too.

"The people are upset and confused. Their lives have been overturned and they're questioning what they've always known. It will be bad for some time," Draven says, tugging me towards him to rest a gentle hand on my shoulder. He smiles when I press my cheek against his hand for a brief moment.

Voices down the street garner our attention. Holy Knights round the corner to approach the cathedral. They're focused on the fight so Draven and I get away. We find a car to steal, hoping to escape before roadblocks are set up. Plowing through them is more troublesome than simply driving out of the city.

"How do we get around them?" I ask, then shriek when something slams on my window. It's Lore. He stumbles to the backdoors, opening one to ease Seren in. There's bloodstains on his side and his arms lay limp in his lap. They're strange in color, a deep gray and cracked as if he has been left out in the sun for years.

"Cyan, get in the back with Seren. You're a better healer than me," Lore orders and I know that is a tone I cannot argue against. Not that I would because he's right. Lore and I exchange seats. Draven pushes on the gas, searching the streets for the easiest escape.

I check Seren's side to see a faint scar. Lore managed to heal that wound, but whatever is wrong with Seren's arm is something else entirely. Seren explains what happened. Even that leaves me clueless on how to proceed. A

basic healing spell makes Seren groan. I catch Lore glancing nervously at every pained noise Seren makes. Then Seren's right finger twitches. The first good sign.

"I'll keep this up, but Olere will probably have to look at you. I don't... I have no idea what to do," I admit. Seren offers a restrained smile.

"It's okay. It doesn't hurt," he says, though it does little to ease the tension in the vehicle.

Draven has found a backroad to take out of the city. I continue healing Seren, relieved that his right hand shows progress. Some color has returned around his elbow and his fingers are able to barely move. His left hand, however, remains limp.

We manage to get to the designated safehouse after over an hour of driving. I assist Seren out of the vehicle. Lore takes over from there. He hurries Seren into the house to join the others. They're celebrating, which makes me think everyone has managed to get out safely. Though that celebration dies down a little when people notice Seren. Olere runs over to help, easing them into another room. The door shuts behind them and the celebration continues. I don't join in, keeping my back to the wall so I'm as far away from all the hugging.

"He'll be alright," Draven says, standing next to me. "And everyone made it out. This is more of a win than expected."

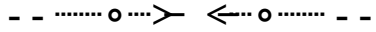
"For now," I mumble. "The church is gonna be pissed."

"Yes, but we dealt a heavy blow, one that they are unlikely to recover from."

That puts a slight smile on my face. "Yeah, I hope so."

Draven stiffens for a brief moment when I I press a kiss against his arm. His light blush doesn't go unnoticed. Smiling, I rest my head on his arm. He grasps my hand, smiling. We stand like this, basking in the celebratory mood around us. People hug and pass around drinks to cheer the first of

potentially many successes. This is nowhere near the end of the trials to come. The church, the monarchy, and the vampires of Vexsis will put up a fight, but we'll be ready.



Everyone has made it out of the city. Celebrations are happening for the success of their mission. Cyan knows this is just the start, but he's happy to have gotten to this point. Next episode will be the last. If you'd like to start thinking up questions for the Q&A, go ahead. You can leave them here or on the final update.

No Ending Better Than This

One Month Later

Seren POV

A pain in my left arm wakes me followed by my right. The doctor warned of this; a tingling sensation, though it resembles more of a thousand needles stabbing my arm in random patterns. Swinging my feet over the bed, the cold floor sends a shiver up my legs.

My prosthetic arm sits on the bedside table. I grab the device, biting my bottom lip when attaching it to the metal contraption attached to the elbow of my left arm. The prosthetic makes a short-lived hissing sound. Gears clink. A slight shock moves up my arm, making it twitch, then my fingers and hand move. It's strange. Sometimes I forget, other times I can't stop staring at the metal hand that has a slightly delayed reaction. The doctor said it'll take time getting used to a prosthetic. I should be grateful. Magic allows me to move my prosthetic like a limb, but every morning I swear I feel my left arm, then I look over and realize it's gone. There's a sinking feeling and I wonder if I'm being silly about it.

"Seren?" Lore calls half asleep. I glance back at him. He turns to rest a hand on my hip, then leans up to kiss my back. "Are your arms bothering you?"

"A little, yeah."

Lore rises fully. His hair tickles my back when he leans in to massage my right arm as the doctor said we should. While my right arm was saved, scars linger. The children said the marks resemble vines twisting up to my elbow. Hyun Woo likes that "we kind of match" in our prosthetics, so they were better reactions than predicted. I had worried they'd be scared or ask a lot of questions that I'd be hesitant to answer because I wouldn't want to frighten them even more.

"The doctor will be visiting again tomorrow for a check up," Lore says, making me groan. He chuckles. "He needs to make sure you're taking well to the prosthetic and that nothing goes wrong with your other arm. And no complaining when he's here. We don't want the children copying and complaining about seeing the doctor."

"I feel like you're using them as an excuse against me," I tease, retreating when Lore tries to lean in for a kiss. With his hold on my arm, he tugs me into his chest to kiss my cheek, then my neck.

"I'm merely making suggestions to keep in mind, seeing as the children have caught on to us. You'll be surprised how often they'll copy you."

"Oh, don't remind me," I grumble, recalling Angel repeating the word "shit" at least four times after she heard me say it. I've never been one to believe we should prevent children from cursing. They're just words, but a part of me cringed upon realizing how easily we influence them.

Chuckling, Lore gets out of bed to head for the bathroom. I follow, joining him at the bathroom sink to brush our teeth. Of course he tries kissing me with a mouth full of toothpaste. I narrowly dodge, managing to finish up before Lore.

Leaning against the doorway, I ask, "Have you been considering when we can move back to the manor?"

Ristain went on an outing to Silra and stopped by to inspect the manor. There was considerable damage, though less than we predicted. Mostly doors kicked in, windows busted, and furniture flipped over in search of anything or anyone left behind. The structure itself remains mostly intact.

"With everything going on, I doubt we can return within the year." He sighs, returning to the bedroom so we can slip into shirts. Lore grabs a hair tie on the dresser to pull his hair into a tight ponytail. "Though the church is losing members faster than we predicted, there's too much heat to risk revealing ourselves yet," he continues, snapping the band.

"The monarchy is keeping an eye out for us too," I add, recalling the last meeting we had with the Red Moon. The monarchy turned on the church quickly. About a week in, the king started announcing investigations into the church's "good for nothing" deals. Trying to throw this mess all on the church. Some believe that, most are hesitant after all that has happened, second guessing everything as we had hoped.

"Valyork probably is as well," Lore says.

"Now would be the perfect time for them to strike."

"Or it's the worst, because if they don't win quickly, it will force everyone back into what they've always known. The church and the monarchy will return to what they once were, like Loraleigh said, and we'll do what we must."

He said that last part with a wicked smile. No doubt referring to the killing he has done up to this point. A part of me feels that Lore almost wants that, that maybe he plans to continue even if our plans work and I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do about any of this. Loraleigh too, I hate that she's right in that sense. Should the vampires decide to attack, they could put an end to all that we've managed to do and all we plan to do. Lore and I agreed to lie low for a few months. Our names and faces are plastered throughout the kingdom. We're too recognizable. That irritated me in the beginning. I wanted to get out there, to continue this momentum, but having a month with Lore and the kids has done more for me than I thought. I feel like I can take a breath.

"What if Valyork doesn't call the attack, but his children do?" I ask.

"That's always a possibility, but I don't know if we need to worry about that." Smirking, he approaches me to rest his arms around my neck. "We have the great Seren Farshine who destroyed two of Vexsis' most powerful Warlords and single handedly battled the Prophet herself. He's an army in his own right, and rather dashing."

"Yeah?" I grab his waist to pull him in for a kiss. "Is that your type then, powerful and dashing?"

"I won't deny that I like a man who can take care of me in more ways than one."

I take his bottom lip between my teeth. He moans, slipping a hand into my hair. I push him back towards the bed, already eagerly marking his neck. Getting dressed seems to have been unnecessary, at least until the bedroom door swings open. I release Lore like he's burning metal.

"Papa, Seren, it's time for breakfast," Oliver announces, shuffling into the room, while reminding me why we have to lock and unlock the door. Lock the door for obvious adult reasons and unlock the door afterwards because one of the kids may need something in the middle of the night.

"Thank you for letting us know. Are you taking over for Draven while he's away?" Lore asks, lifting Oliver into his arms.

"Yep! I woke everyone up... except Arline. She woke me up."

Lore and I laugh. We're about to head downstairs when Oliver whines. Lore gives him a curious stare, then full on howls while I choke at Oliver's demand, "I should get a good morning kiss too. You and Seren gave each other one."

"My apologies." Lore presses a kiss to Oliver's cheek, then leans the boy towards me. I kiss his other cheek, blushing a little, then head downstairs.

We've been staying in a six bedroom house that one of Lore's older children knew was vacant. Apparently, she works in the housing business so she managed to get us here and fabricated some papers that state someone else resides here. It's on the small side compared to Seymour manor, but the children are away from everything. Their lives are relatively normal, allowing Arline to continue teaching them and playing in the expansive yard.

The dining room's a tad cramped even without Cyan and Draven. They must not have returned from their mission. Lore managed to get a few staff members, though nothing compared to what he had at Seymour Manor. Breakfast's sat before everyone and I find myself scurrying about the table

to assist the children. Ashby isn't the best at eating dippy eggs on toast, which he learned from me so I'm taking responsibility for the mess. Wiping the yolk from his chin, I catch a glimpse of Lore across the table with Reegan. It reminds me of when I first came to Seymour Manor, how much has changed, and that I wouldn't give up this new life for the world.

"Seren," Ashby calls.

"Yeah?"

"You really scared me when you first showed up," he says, confusing me, but then he smiles bright and warm. "But now I'm super duper glad you're here."

"Me too. I'm glad to be here with all of you." I laugh, breaking into a smile as bright as his.

I never expected to be like this, ever. Even if I hoped to one day marry and become a parent, it almost felt like an unattainable dream. In the back of my mind, I felt I didn't deserve that.

Just then, Cyan and Draven enter the dining room. The children are in an uproar welcoming them. Draven nods, a signal that he wants to talk. Since Lore's buttering more toast for the kids, I get up to join Draven in another room.

"How did things go?" I ask, shutting the doors to the small study behind us.

"Alright," he replies. "The monarchy is continuing to feign ignorance. They've set up a panel to send inquiries to the church, asking for records and proof against all the acquisitions. Many of the citizens aren't buying it."

"That's a good sign."

Draven's frown states there's more before he adds, "Many are demanding that the monarchy must send inquiries to Vexsis as well to return the mortals who were illegally taken there."

"Which we all know won't happen considering those people will point to the monarchy for capturing them."

Draven nods. "And the vampires won't return anyone, regardless of any demands. There's already talk of another war. I've heard from a few of the Red Moon vampires stationed in Vexsis that Valyork has summoned many of his war council, though it remains unclear if it's merely to protect what they determine to be their property or attack."

"Does Ristain have, or plan, to send anyone who could potentially hear these plans? You already spoke to him about all this, right?"

"Yes, we stopped at the Red Moon headquarters first. There are discussions of sending more members, but Valyork is..."

"Paranoid," I finish for him.

"Right. He won't be adding any new members to his council or letting anyone in that he doesn't deem absolutely necessary. So, we likely won't know of an attack until it's already happening."

Rubbing my temple, I let myself fall into a chair. "Although I knew this was just the start, I wasn't prepared for all this stress."

"None of us are." Draven sits in the chair across from me. "We'll be lucky if this only takes a few decades to fix."

"So does that mean you and Cyan will take a much needed vacation before or after all this?" I smile at the slight tension my question puts in his shoulders.

"We've yet to discuss that," he mumbles, keeping his eyes on the floor.

"You should or you'll keep putting it off, then who knows if it will ever happen."

Clearing his throat, Draven changes the subject, "Ristain has other jobs for us, but Cyan and I are taking a few days to rest and recover. You and His

Grace should visit headquarters soon to receive further updates. Ristain likely has far more to speak about to the two of you."

With that, he gets up to head for the dining room. Before he leaves, I call, "One more thing, Draven."

He stands by the day, looking back at me.

"Should this work out as we hope, what do you think Lore will want to do afterwards?" I ask, momentarily puzzling him. "Do you think he will want to continue his own form of justice?"

He understands that and doesn't hesitate to nod. "Though that justice won't be aimed so fiercely on the church, but rather whatever crime he stumbles upon."

"And if I told him to stop?"

He hesitates to reply, "He'd probably do it behind your back."

That's what I thought.

"I do believe that he will listen to you in other ways," Draven adds. "If you keep an eye on him, tell him not that person, I think he'd listen. It'd probably do him a lot of good too."

"Maybe." I sigh and choose not to linger on it. Like this war, revolution, whatever it is, it can't be solved overnight. Lore and I will have more to talk about, one day, just not today.

Draven steps out of the room and I follow, rejoining everyone to finish breakfast. The kids have an off day, so Lore and I join them in the backyard. Once pristine, the yard has come to resemble the manor's in the sense that it's crowded with toys and dirt castles. Isabella became determined to create an entire kingdom, even decorated with stick figures courtesy of Hyun Woo and Reegan. They return to their venture while I play hide and seek with the little ones. Lore assists Darika with training. All feels as it should be, happy, playful, and so exceedingly ordinary. It's perfect. It's what I want for the

children everyday, although I don't know if I can keep up with them everyday. By noon, I need a break. My arms ache, particularly my left where the prosthetic attaches to my elbow.

Requesting a breather, I sit on the back steps of the house, listening to the children squeal and laugh. There isn't a sound more beautiful than that. Angel chases Nalo with a stick that I think is a make-believe sword. Oliver runs after her roaring, as a dragon I'm guessing? And Ashby shimmies after them with two leaves that... I have no idea what they're meant to be, but we don't question a child's imagination, especially when they're tiring themselves out. Bailey follows them, barking and swinging a giant stick around, so even the dog will need a nap later.

"Mind if I join you?" Lore asks, though plops next to me anyway.

"Tired already? Shouldn't a father as skilled as you have better resilience?"

"No father has the resilience that a child has." Lore leans against me. "What did Ashby say to you earlier in the dining room? You looked happy to hear it."

"Oh, he said he was *super duper* glad that I'm here."

"Super duper, wow, that's impressive." Lore whistles, then goes quiet. His attention warms me, a soft gaze I can't describe. "I'm glad too, that you're here, that you," He glances at my arm, slipping his hand over the metal that takes a moment to react to his touch. His brows furrow. "I never said how scared I was when this happened, when I saw how injured you were after the battle. I thought the children would lose you, that I would and that I never..."

"Never what?" I ask, puzzled by his pained expression. He surprises me with a kiss, desperate, quick, and still takes my breath away.

"I love you, Seren Farshine," he says, almost pleads. "And I'll love you in every life given to me."

I don't know why hearing him say that alongside my full name makes me choke up. Maybe because I understand that Lore always saw that part of me, even when he wanted me dead. He was able to see past the facade the church forced upon me, slowly picking and prodding at the man within until I was brave enough to step out. Seren Farshine likely would have remained hidden for the rest of my life, if not for Lore.

"I love you too. No amount of time will ever dull my feelings for you, Lore," I reply, tugging him in for another kiss.

Lore leans against me, breaths trembling against my swollen lips. Then we're kissing again and I know I'll never get enough of this, enough of him. I want to hear him say he loves me again, a thousand times over for all our lives to come. Out of everything from the Holy Mother's teachings, I hope at least that bit is true; that our souls will return to this world, so I can find Lore again and again until the end of time.

"When this is over," he whispers against my lips. "We can be a true family; the kids, you, and me. I'll give you everything you've ever wanted."

"That sounds like you're expecting to do all the work while I'm the stay at home dad."

"That is an option. I just want you to know you can make that choice now, Seren. Whatever you want."

"Whatever I want," I repeat, holding his hand tightly. My heart palpitates. To have so many choices, I thought the decision would be hard, but, "I'd like to try staying at home for a while with the kids. Stay at home dad doesn't sound so bad."

"Yeah," he whispers, short of breath, same as I. His eyes search mine, almost frantically. He sits a little closer, whispering every word, "When some time has passed, when we have a chance, Seren, would you... would you marry me?"

"I'd marry you right now," I answer without hesitation because I would. For once, the answers are coming to me so clearly, regardless of Lore's secrets,

of my own past, and of the trouble I know to come.

Lore smiles, sweet and beautiful. He presses his forehead against mine, releasing a relieved laugh that I mirror. Then I'm kissing him, hoping for the day when we can have that black wedding he spoke about. Or red. Or purple. Or white. I don't care, so long as it's ours, so long as we're together.

"Papa, Daddy, come play with us!" Nalo shouts so nonchalantly that he doesn't notice what he said. I do though. So does Lore, who stands and offers his hand, smiling so brightly that he could rival every star in the sky.

"Let's go. Our children are calling," he says, pretending not to see the tears building in my eyes.

I take his hand, the one I'm eternally grateful to be offered, and walk with him towards my real family; the ones who love me and the ones whom I love and will love more with every passing day. I couldn't wish for anything better than this. I couldn't dream of anything better than this.

THE END

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Wow, endings are always difficult, but considering how this story wasn't really planned, I think I did okay lol The issues in this story became so deeply rooted in society that I realized there's no way I could address it all. Even then, fix is a word I use lightly. Issues will always remain, so I felt ending on a note that Seren feels happy with his family and prepared for a future with them was the best way to go. Our boys even agreed to marrying one day, which isn't my usual end of a story, but Seren and Lore are 100% the marry and have a big family type, which is obvious XD Anywho, I did have a lot of fun with this story even if I got a bit stressed by the ending. I hope everyone enjoyed it as well!

Make sure to leave questions for the Q&A. I'm going to post it on Sunday to give everyone a few days to respond. Reminder, my new free

story is out, Out of the Office Romance, so you can always start that now that TSoLS is over. But yeah, it's the end, thanks everyone!

Q&A

Will there be a second book?

This story is so long that it already is two books, but no. The story is done. As I explained in the author's note, the issues in this world are deep. It's not just about killing the bad guy and saving the world. I feel this is good enough. The world is moving towards a brighter future while Lore and Seren have a chance to be a family. That's more than good enough.

Will there be a spin-off with the other characters?

Nope.

Will there be a wedding scene between Lore and Seren?

Nope.

When Lore and Seren get married, will there be surname changes?

I went back and forth on this one a lot. I was thinking maybe Lore would take Seren's last name as a kind of stepping point for him too, moving away from his harsh past with the Seymour family. But I could also see Seren hyphenating, so Seren Farshine-Seymour. I'm honestly not sure, but either is cute lol

Where would they go on their honeymoon?

I don't see them going on one. They'd have a small wedding for people close to them, and that's it. Maybe a family vacation though? Something where everyone could go, like a beach so the kids could have fun.

Why did the church send Seren to investigate Lore? Seren was asking himself this question, and that made me curious too.

The same reason that was brought up, the church didn't like Lore. He was someone who could potentially be the serial killer, so they sent someone to see if they could maybe frame him for it. They just happened to be right in their judgment.

Who killed Ayden Marshalls?

Ikehn. Lore already suspected Ikehn of crimes, so when he killed Ayden, Lore used it as a way to inspect Seren's investigative skills.

Was it Lore who ordered the brothel to be shot down?

Yeah. Draven used his trait to put a mission to shoot up the brothel into the gang's mind. Lore knew there would be casualties, but wanted the patrons and owners dead, so he considered the collateral damage worth it.

Will Jakoby, Miss Harmony, or Lord Phaeron show up again in the couple's future? I rather liked them.

No. Seren and Lore are not the type to be hospitable to each other's previous partners. Seren would be uncomfortable, and if you like Jakoby you wouldn't want Lore around him. If he ever tried anything with Seren (intentionally or not,) Lore would probably sneak behind Seren's back to make Jakoby "disappear," in a much more permanent way.

Did Lore have a hand in Lady Roxanne Sarron's death?

Yes, Lore killed her.

How did the rest of the children take the realization that their Papa is dating Seren now?

The younger kids were fine with it. The older kids, like Reegan, Isabell, and Darika would be a bit distant at first since they fully understand who Seren was and would still have some semblance of distrust, but ultimately be fine with it.

When or ever will Aja's body be found?

Lore usually hides bodies he doesn't want found, so probably never.

Lore knew that Seren was really sent to investigate him and that Aja was working at Trinia when Seren was there. How does he stay up-to-date about the goings-on at the church?

Lore suspected Seren was sent to investigate him because why else would the church, who hates him, send a paladin to stay at his place. That's just a deduction. As for who works at the church, that isn't private. He just has to ask some officers for work records of priests who worked in Trinia around the time Seren was training. He's a good investigator.

When did Lore change his mind from making an example out of Seren to wanting the man by his side?

There wasn't really a moment. He just fell for Seren over time because they had to be around each other.

How did Lore and Draven find out it was Jakoby who Seren went on that date with?

Don't know. Never thought about it. They're sneaky, so guess work.

Does Seren have a human lifespan? If so, how would their relationship continue and how would Lore act after his death?

No. Mages live longer than humans, and the stronger they are, the longer they'll live. Seren will likely hit around the 700-800 range. Lore is dhampir so he's more likely to hit around 1000-1500 and he's already over 200, so there's a chance he and Seren will die around the same time or Lore will outlive Seren by a few centuries. If Seren died first, Lore would just spend more time with their children and grandchildren. He'd probably not be as much of the vigilante type by then thanks to Seren's influence, so he'd just be the happy grandpa spending a lot of time with his grandchildren.

So...how much worse was Lore originally planned to be...?

He was meant to kill one of his older adopted children to show how rigid his rules are. This man was meant to be in an abusive relationship where he and his wife got into drugs and just needed a lot of help. They were physically and emotionally abusive to each other, but Lore killed them instead. This would have shown to Seren that Lore's love, while strong, only lasts if the people he "loves" stick to his very specific rules.

He was also meant to be much more obviously manipulative with Seren. He definitely was throughout the series, just in more subtle ways. Originally, he was going to mentally fuck with Seren to the point that people would question if Seren was actually better off with Lore. It was meant to be so bad that the ending was going to be a tragedy or bittersweet. My original plans were; Seren realizes Lore is too far gone and kills him, then lives the rest of his life caring for the children and Seymour Manor. Seren kills Lore then takes his own life, or Seren and Draven discuss that, should Lore ever go too far, Seren would "handle it." In other words, he would kill Lore if the time came to it. But I'm shit at dark romances and realized I'd end up hating my own story, so I tossed those endings aside.

What is Arline's trait?

Matter Manipulation. She can turn objects into another. The catch is she has to have seen and touched the object she wants to turn it into. In her case, she can also only manipulate weapons. She switches between them with ease because of this. There were meant to be more fight scenes and more scenes with Arline, but I ultimately decided not to because I had no idea what I was doing lol

Will Ristain and Arline mend their relationship?

I don't think they will. Arline doesn't feel the need to and Ristain will be busy for a while.

What does the future hold for Lore, Seren, and the Seymour household? (Not to mention Olere.)

Struggling through the revolution they started, then happiness I guess lol

Do you plan to release any chapters from current Lore's POV?

No. I probably wouldn't like whatever I wrote because how the hell do I write from a murderous vigilante's perspective? And I like that it forces people to pay attention to what Lore says, how he says it, and how he treats people if they want to try and figure him out.

How do you see Cyan and Draven's relationship evolving with time? How much time will it take for Cyan to get comfortable with physical contact with Draven (or anyone)?

It will take years for Cyan to adjust. I hate stories that push aside phobias and trauma like it can be healed because "they're special!" It takes time to heal and Cyan will heal because he has loving and supportive people beside him. He'll be more comfortable with Draven first, then over time allow others to hug him. I never see Cyan as being the overly affectionate type though. Draven really isn't either so it works.

Will Lore get Seren to go back to the club, for non-spying purposes?

Probably. I see Lore getting Seren out and about to have more "normal" experiences, although it'll never be a regular occurrence. Seren would have fun the first few times, but he'd never be the type to enjoy partying.

Will Olere stay close to the Seymour estate once it's rebuilt? Will Lore tolerate his kinda father in law?

Yes, especially with everything that's going on. First it'll be for general protection, but he'll eventually become a grandfather figure to the children. He and Lore will always be the type to argue, but I see them as having that "only I can bully you" type of mentality in the future.

Now that Seren has access to the Seymour fortune, will he beat Lore at spoiling the kids?

Absolutely lol Lore already spoils them, but Seren will enable him even more haha

Were Draven's parents nobility or just high-class? Who were his parents?

Just high-class rich people.

Did Draven have siblings?

No.

Do Draven and Cyan go on their vacation? Where to?

Eventually, yeah. They'd just travel. I don't think they'd stay in one place. They'd want to see different places.

Do Draven and Cyan grow old together?

Kind of. Draven is a vampire, so he will outlive Cyan by a few thousand years. They will be together until Cyan passes away.

How many children does Lore have in total?

No idea, never wrote that down. A lot lol

I'd like a quick rundown/recap on Lore's children and how they came to live with him, if possible. Just the current ones.

Oliver, Ashby & Angel, Nalo, Hyun Woo, Reegan, Isabella, and Darika.

I don't really have more details than what was already said in the story. The basic idea was just that every child came from an incredibly abusive home. Since Lore works with the police, he has access to records concerning abused children and he or Draven keeps an eye on them. Sometimes he's able to get to the children before anything else happens, and sometimes like with Isabella, he discovers them after something terrible has already happened, so he "gets rid off" the parents and adopts the children.

Out of the 5 main characters, what would their living aesthetics be?

Lore would be gothic, I guess. He likes dark and sexy stuff, so sexy gothic lol

Seren would probably be minimalist from his time at the church.

Draven would also be minimalist, but maybe more modern.

Cyan doesn't have an aesthetic. He's pure chaos and will change on a whim.

Arline would be boho (is that right? I had to google aesthetics lol) but, like, something kinda free form that has to do with nature.

The extra of Seren and Lore meeting as kids (on patreon,) is that canon or what if?

It's an AU--alternate universe, for those who may not know.

Did Seren keep and frame the picture that Oliver drew?

Yep.

When did Lore first start catching feelings for Seren?

Probably when they broke into Ikehn's place. He at least found Seren more interesting, though not necessarily in a romantic light.

If the kids ever move out, who would have the empty nest syndrome?

Well, Seren and Lore will live for a long time. Seren definitely would want to foster more, hopefully help families get back onto their feet, and if any children need a home then they'll adopt. But if they ever didn't have kids around, Lore would feel the hit first.

Do Lore, Seren, and the kids go back to the estate?

Yeah, once it's safe to do so.

So when Seren uses his magic, will it form at the end of the prosthetic or where the connection is?

Magic forms where Seren needs it, so it'll be in his hand or over his arm or wherever he wants it to go.

Also, since he lost an arm, I'm assuming the prophet was in sort of bad shape as well?

Nope. The Prophet has had years of training, and she is legitimately much stronger than Seren. Seren's merely capable of reaching her level now with the right training. She would have been tired from the fight, but that's it.

What of their whole religion is true? Is there really three holy mothers, etc?

The Three Mothers aren't real. The original plan was for magic to have been caused by radiation. Thousands of years ago, 3 stars collided, which could be seen in the sky by both mortals and vampires. The vampires were far enough away that it was small, but they recognized it as an explosion whereas humans were closer and the radiation caused some hallucinations, which led to a belief that these 3 stars were holy entities. Especially when people started to develop magic, but I never really talked about it because I wasn't sure if it made sense xD

How did you come up with the story?

I didn't really. This was mostly written from scratch. Since I have paid content as well, I tend to focus more on the plots of those while my free stories are more freestyle, you could say. It's easier that way. I just wanted to do another enemies to lovers type thing with vampires. It's why the story ended as it did because I never fleshed out the world or characters enough to get a grasp on where I was heading. I just kept going.

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This is finally finished at over 200k words x_x Thanks everyone for following me and the boys on this ride. Sorry it's not as planned out, but I found this works best for me with my workload because I want to continue offering free to read stories. It seems readers still enjoyed it, so that's great to hear. If you're new and like vampire stories, I do have another called

What Makes a Monster, so you can give that a read or look at the list below. I've written down my most current list of novels ^^

Books Available on Amazon

Speak the Truth (Three Volumes)
Whisper Woods
The Not So Super Hero
Out of the Office Romance

Ongoing Patreon Exclusive Novel:

After Death

Completed Free to Read Novels:

Invisible Boy
What Makes a Monster
Dear Caleb
Fools in Love
-K
14 Days
The Lonely Ones
Pictures of Us

Completed Paid Novels Available on Tapas:

Speak the Truth
The Matchmaker Prince
Riddle Me This
Whisper Woods
The Not So Super Hero
The Antidote to Doubt
Save the Demon King
Reborn as the Villain's Lackey

Completed Comics Available on Tapas

Speak the Truth (a short adaptation of the novel)
Love Algorithm

If you wanna stalk me on other sites, here ya go;
Tapas: Twoony
Twitter: Tw00ny
TikTok: twoonyreads
Instagram: twoonyreads
Patreon: Twoony

Since I post early chapters and exclusive content on patreon with mature scenes, my account is marked 18+ so you can't search it. You have to use the external link I left here or simply type in www.patreon.com/Twoony

Thanks again everyone!